



Facing
"Elf
Speeder"

機巧少女は

傷つかない

Unbreakable Machine-Doll

海冬レイジ



Illustration
るるお

ほっとしたのもつかの間、
怯えたアンリは尻を浮かせ、
弾みで手をすべらせた。
雷真はあわてて
真下にすべり込み、
際どくアンリを受け止めた。



「つまり、私こそが〈完全なる個〉――
不完全な存在たる貴方たちには、
到底、勝ち目がないと申しました」





Henriette Beleu
アンリエット・ブルー

「ごめんなさい……！」

Charlotte Beleu
シャルロット・ブルー

「謝らないで。すべてが終わったなら、
また一緒に暮らすのよ。いいわね？」

Raishin Ahabane
赤羽雷真

「アテにしてるぜ、
勝利の女神」

「雷真……」

Yaya
夜々

Frey
フレイ

「私はロキのお姉ちゃんなのに……
役に、立たない……」

Lohi
ロキ

「でしゃばるな。
あんたがいても、足手まといになるだけだ」

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Prologue – The Sorrowful Dragon

“Tell me the truth Raishin! Do you really hate Yaya that much!?”



Nurse Yaya was crying while advancing forward.

Raishin scrambled backwards on his bed, and spoke with half closed eyes.

“Before I answer you, first you have to throw away that giant syringe.”

“Th, this is a necessary tool for your true feelings to emerge.”

“That’s just coercion! You just want to extract the answer you want to hear from me!”

This was the first floor of the medical faculty. Next to the doctor’s office, there was a ward for students.

Injured from the battle the other day, both he and Loki had been admitted into the ward. Loki was currently in the bed next to Raishin, reading a thick book on magic arts with a sour expression on his face.

Perhaps she thought what Raishin said made sense, for Yaya threw aside the giant syringe.

Raishin sighed in relief, then scratched his head roughly.

“Well, it’s not like I hate you or anything.”

“That means you like me right? You love Yaya deeply, right?”

Yaya was slowly advancing up the bed. She was biting her lustrous lips, eyes moist, and cheeks slightly flushed with passion. She stared at Raishin deeply.

By now she was close enough for him to feel her body warmth. A sweet and fluffy smell wafted over. Raishin started to feel dizzy, but he marshalled his senses together, and pushed Yaya’s head away.

“Quit it. Remember, why did we crossed the vast seas, all the way to the other side of the world? Was it for sightseeing? A honeymoon?

“Well...”

“We have a job to do, a mission we have to accomplish at all costs. This isn’t the time or place to be speaking about falling head over heels in love.”

It was a sound argument. Yaya faltered, becoming despondent.

Raishin sighed, rubbing Yaya’s head.

“I don’t hate you, and I think of you as an important partner. Isn’t that enough already?”

“Ab-solutely not enough.”

“Don’t give me such a flat refusal immediately! It took all the kindness in my heart to come up with that!”

Yaya began to break down in tears.

Yaya tried her utmost best at preparing advances, and tried all means and ways of temptation, but there’s not even the slightest hint of Raishin coming on... Is Yaya really that lacking in charm?”

“Before I comment on your “charms”, consider the fact that this is a ward, ok? This is a public space, alright? If you start acting weird in a place like this, I’m very sure it’s a violation of moral ethics.”

“As long as we have love, that is something that can be easily overcome!”

“Don’t just casually dismiss ethics like that! Before speaking of love, go learn some common sense first!”

It looked like she was getting weary of all the talking. Yaya had half risen to her feet, and was slowly sidling over towards Raishin.

There was a glint in her eye, like a cat that had cornered a mouse— or more accurately, like a tiger’s.

On the other hand, his body was still wounded. If it came down to a contest of brute strength, every outcome he could think of would end badly in his favour.

Not good. If only there was a saviour somewhere...

“Ah, Irori! Perfect timing!”

“Eh!? Sis!?”

Gulping nervously in guilt, Yaya flusteredly turned around.

However, there was no one standing in the doorway.

Momentarily, she felt relief. Slowly turning her head back, the sight of an empty bed greeted her.

A cool summer breeze blew in from the open window, causing the curtains to flap about.

Tears began to fall from Yaya’s face,

“He escaped!!”

(Sheesh, Yaya can be such a bother sometimes...)

A bit fed up, Raishin leaned against the backrest of a bench, trying to catch his breath.

He was on the roof of the medical faculty. Below the clear blue sky, white sheets and white uniforms were fluttering about, creating a contrast so vivid it hurt the eye to look at.

He had flown out of the window and ran away temporarily, but almost immediately returned to the medical faculty building, and escaped up onto the roof. In principle, idiots who were admitted into the ward were not permitted to wander about outside.

(It’s been happening for several days now, huh... Yaya acting all spoilt like that.)

He had been hospitalised for ten days. For the first five days, in contrast to her current behaviour, Yaya had been in a good mood of sorts.

The turning point had been the sixth day, when Frey came down to visit.

Ever since that day, Frey had been bringing down lunch for him. Even though she had classes in the mornings, and was busy with the Night Party in the evenings, she had faithfully continued to do so. It was just like a dutiful wife visiting her husband.

(Well, it's not like we're having some sort of love affair going on, more like she just feels a strong sense of obligation towards me I guess...)

Letting out a sigh, he laid down on the bench. A shadow passed over his head.

Thinking it looked like the familiar shape of a little dragon, he hurriedly sat upright.

“... Just a bird, huh?”

The white wing flying overhead belonged to a dove. It looked nothing like Sigmund.

(That reminds me. I haven't seen her around lately.)

Sigmund's mistress, Charlotte Belew.

Someone who, like Raishin, had very little friends, and so they had befriended each other... although, whether she could still be called his friend was something questionable at best.

“You are really, really an idiot the size of Big Ben!”

Ten days ago, just before Raishin set out on his reckless excursion, Charl had yelled that at him, and ran away with tears seemingly in her eyes. Since then, she hadn't even visited him once.

Was it possible he had made her angry?

(That would be bad... Hm?)

Looking over at the fluttering sheets, a person standing by the edge of the roof caught his eye.

Raishin, for a moment, confused the person with someone else.

(Charl—?)

No, that wasn't her. Charl had golden hair that sparkled under the light; the girl on the roof had flaxen hair instead. The way she wore her hat was different too, pulling it low over her eyes, giving off an unfashionable feeling.

The girl didn't notice Raishin's presence, staring straight at the clock tower.

The clock tower itself had been gorgeously decorated. Flowers adorned the tower as far as their stems could reach, and numerous flags fluttered about in the wind. If he strained his ears, he could hear the faint sound of a band playing.

Now that he thought about it, there was a supposed to be a memorial ceremony commemorating the hundred year anniversary of the construction of the clock tower, or so he heard.

The girl placed her hands on the railing.

Whether through his keen reading of the situation, or some form of intuition, alarm bells starting going off inside Raishin's head.

Not good, he thought; by this time his body had already sprang into action. Raishin ran forward on his legs, which had just been removed from their cast. Meanwhile, the girl had climbed onto the railing in one breath.

Just as he predicted, she clambered over the railing, and launched her body into the empty space in front of her.

Raishin leapt over the railing, chasing after the girl with neither hesitation nor plan.

Grasping on to her arm in mid-air, his free hand grabbed on to the railing.

He felt a sudden increase in weight. A sharp pain ran through his right collarbone, causing him to lose to lose his grip involuntarily. The railing began to recede into the distance all too quickly, the excess weight ruthlessly dragging Raishin downwards. The roof was six floors up. Directly below them was the stone terrace. If they were to hit it straight on, there was no way they were just going to walk away with light injuries!

“Yaya! Come to me!”

Offering up a prayer, he called the name of his partner. Of course, there was no way his voice could reach her. However—

The thought behind it, did.

With a crash, a window on the first floor broke, a black shadow bursting forth from within.

A dark, ghostly aura seemed to be spreading forth from the thing which had emerged from the window; it was a black haired girl.

A tiny horn that sparkled like it was diamond was growing on her forehead.

(Yaya...!? What’s with that horn—?!)

No, that wasn’t important now. Raishin swallowed the words coming out of his mouth, extending his right hand out towards his partner.

He focused his magic energy. Yaya’s whole body began to swell with power. Dashing up the wall, she gently held onto Raishin, halting his fall. At the same time, she dug her fingers into the wall, forcing them to decelerate.

A crumbling sound could be heard as Yaya’s nails gouged out bits of the wall as they descended.

And then, with a soft thud, they finally landed.

“Thanks, Yaya. You’ve saved—“

“Raishin is an idiot! Why would you do something so reckless like that!?”

The moment he opened his mouth, he got yelled at.

The horn on her forehead was disappearing. In its place, her eyes were brimming with tears.

“... It couldn't be helped. This one over here suddenly jumped off the roof.”

The situation was awkward. Raishin turned his face away like he was trying to escape, and noticed something unusual.

The girl he was holding on to was trembling all over.

“Hey, are you ok? Are you injured anywhere—“

“Nooo!! A man!!”

She suddenly pushed him away.

Because he was unprepared for this sudden attack, Raishin couldn't react, and so tumbled over.

The girl hid behind some bushes, peeking over at them fearfully. As Raishin thought, the girl's face did resemble Charl's, but the frightened expression on the girl's face was nothing like Charl's at all.

“Why did you do that all of a sudden!?”

The girl jumped up in shock. Pulling her hat down with both hands, she covered her face with it.

“I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry”

“Ah, no, I'm not mad at you or anything. What's wrong with you? Are you hurt anywhere?”

“Why are you asking her if she's feeling well, Raishin?”

Yaya's cold voice cut in. Raishin ignored it, and walked over to the girl's location.

"Hey, are you suicidal or something? Why would you jump off the roof like that?"

The girl dripped onto her hat tightly, while slowly backing away. And then—

"Un... Unreasonable."

"Huh?"

"You hindrance, unpleasant man, interferer! Why did you have to go and save me...!?"

While crying, the girl started to blame Raishin.

"Take responsibility for this! Compensate me!"

"Responsibility... Well, even if you say that..."

"Kill me! If you won't, at least mess me up!"

"... What's 'mess you up'?"

"Just follow your carnal desires and violate me! I don't care anymore, so do as you please! Let out all that lust completely!"

"Like hell I'm going to do that! Just what kind of person do you take me for!"

Giving her partner a shock by turning around suddenly, Yaya smiled the smile of a killer demon,

"You heard her, Raishin. Let's mess this vixen up."

"You don't mean the same thing as her!"

In that moment, the girl had fled out of the bushes, and ran away while still crying.

“Ah, hey! Wait!”

The girl wasn't running away particularly fast. At her speed, he could easily catch up to her. However—

The ground rumbling signified that a mysterious earthquake was happening, and Raishin's feet were rooted to the spot.

Yaya was sniffing as she slowly advanced towards him,

“Once you caught up to her you were going to mess her up, weren't you... while following your carnal desires, you were going to let out all your lust...”

“Wha— No! Like something like that could ever happen! Read the atmosphere, Yaya!”

“Even though you keep ignoring Yaya's advances... when that vixen tempted you, you...!”

There was no time to pacify her. Yaya flew at Raishin, wrapping her hands around his neck.

Her bottled up unhappiness showed, for today's Yaya was using more strength than she normally would. His windpipe was being constricted, and the flow of blood to his head cut off. His consciousness was rapidly fading—

A tremendous roar could be heard.

Yaya was surprised, and dropped Raishin. While coughing and choking Raishin opened his eyes, only to see the sky was being split into two above his head.

A dazzling bright light was striking the clock tower. Like butter dropped into a frying pan, the clock tower quickly began to disintegrate, causing the earth to rumble as it slowly began to lurch over.

It was like looking at the Leaning Tower of Piza. No, actually, it was even worse. The clock tower was slanting at a greater angle.

The clock tower was a symbol of The Royal Academy of Machinart, Walpurgis. With a hundred years of history behind it, it now spat out dust so fine it looked like mist, as it crumbled all too quickly.

The participants of the ceremony began to flee. The dust cloud began to envelop the sky before his eyes, rapidly engulfing both Raishin and Yaya inside.

Within the midst of the worst visibility possible, for a brief second, something faint could be seen.

It was a silhouette floating above in mid-air. Golden hair fluttering, riding atop a steel coloured dragon, the figure quietly observed the carnage that had been brought about by its own hand.

Bringing to mind the image of the dragon knights of legend, it was both gallant, and beautiful. The shadow was—

“Charl...!?”

Chapter 1 – Light, That Which Falls Apart

(1)

Some time had passed since the destruction of the clock tower, and now it was noon.

Eyeing the basket which had been thrust at him suspiciously, Raishin turned his head in the opposite direction.

“I appreciate the effort you went through to make it, but I don’t want it.”

At his cold refusal, the pearl-haired maiden— Frey, turned to stone.

The basket she was carrying in her hands, which was filled with delicious sandwiches that looked like they had come straight from a clubhouse, wobbled slightly. Incidentally, so did the two large bulges on her chest.

“In any case, you’ve probably put something inside there again today, haven’t you? Something poisonous.”

Frey clung to the wolf-dog accompanying her, and started to sniffle.

“Don’t try and use tears to get your way! I’m the one who wants to cry here!”

“Uu... But, you don’t trust me at all...”

“That’s because your past behaviour has been suspect, ok? This is a result of your repeated offences, understand?”

As Raishin was admonishing her, a blade filled with malice was suddenly thrust against his neck.

Yaya rose to her feet in shock. She looked like she wanted to try and extricate Raishin from his situation, but the blade had already cut into Raishin’s neck, so she couldn’t make any false moves.

Directly next to Raishin, a humanoid machine whose grotesque shape made it hard to tell if it was angel or devil was standing there. Its whole body seemingly made up of blades, its primary characteristic was that its entire body seemed to be comprised of acute angles. Of course, it was Loki’s automaton, Cherubim.

“... What is the meaning of this, dear neighbour Loki?”

“If I may say so myself, I am a tolerant person... However, there are three things in this world I cannot forgive. People who give me orders. People who defy me. And finally, scum who make my sister cry.”

“Even if I’m the victim!? Day after day, I’m the one whose body is subjected to poison here!”

The blade dug deeper, cutting off Raishin’s protests.

“—Ok, fine! All I have to do is just eat it, right!?”

Grinding his teeth, Raishin finally resigned himself, and Cherubim released him.

Expectation filled Frey's red eyes, as she thrust out the basket once more.

The pupils of Yaya's eyes darkened, resembling a bottomless lake, as she stared at Raishin.

Raishin had the air of a man facing the death sentence as he took the proffered basket.

"... Are you absolutely sure you didn't put anything weird inside this time?"

Frey's head bobbed up and down as she nodded.

"So you haven't put in salt or rum or dried newts or powdered scorpions or sleeping pills?"

Bobble, bobble.

Raishin braced himself, and reached for a fluffy egg sandwich.

Taking a deep breath, he steeled his resolve, and bit down.

"—Geh!"

It was tongue-numbingly bitter, and his throat was burning. For a brief moment, Raishin coughed violently.

Raishin silently glared at her, causing Frey to confess whilst on the verge of tears.

"The professor from the medical department... gave me a prototype drug..."

"...What kind of medicine is it?"

"It's supposed to boost the fertility of livestock like cows and horses..."

"Don't mix something like that inside! Wait, you lied to me!?"

"Uu... it's not a lie."

While hugging onto the neck of the wolf dog, Frey denied it in a rare show of stubbornness.

“Normally, I’d put something inside the ingredient of the sandwich, but...”

“What’s with that ‘but’?”

“This time, instead of putting it in, I mixed the drug into the ingredient, and sandwiched it between the bread...”

“That’s just splitting hairs! At any rate, what you’re doing is already human experimentation isn’t it!”

With a crash, Yaya kicked her chair aside as she stood up.

“That’s enough already!”

“Oh, Yaya. That’s right, you tell her.”

“Why haven’t you learned your lesson yet, Raishin!?”

“... Huh, me? Why are you angry at me?”

“Even though you’ve been tricked all this while, you still continue to eat her food... Don’t tell me, you actually love this vixen....!?”

A panicked Yaya turned to look in Frey’s direction.

Frey blushed ever so slightly, and diverted her gaze away meaningfully.

Yaya began to sob convulsively, and at the same time, the ground began to tremble.

And so, ultimately— Raishin got the short end of the stick.

“.... She jumped?”

While sticking a band-aid onto Raishin’s face, Frey repeated what Raishin had said.

Covered in wounds all over, Raishin was currently being attended to by Frey. She was sterilising and sticking band-aids in an experienced manner. Although her reflexes were terrible, it looked like she was skilful with her fingers.

Yaya had sulkily stormed out. Though having said that, since there was a malicious aura floating over from outside the window, she was probably observing them from nearby.

It was noisy outside. A continual stream of students flowed incessantly up and down the dusty main street; professors and security guards were about, and even city officials had made the trip down. Because of the collapse of the clock tower earlier in the day, the whole academy was like a cat on hot bricks, a different kind of restlessness and tension than the one associated with the Night Party permeating the air.

Raishin continued on, while observing the hustle and bustle without.

“Yeah. A short while ago, she jumped off from the roof. Almost immediately before the destruction of the clock tower.”

“... What kind of person was she?”

“Hm... Well, she had flax coloured hair, and she wore a hat.”

Frey tilted her head slightly. With such little information, it wasn't possible to narrow down the girl.

“What else... Ah, she had that kind of feeling about her.”

Raishin was pointing to someone outside the window. Standing somewhat dazedly in front of a grove of trees was a lone female student. She had brown hair, and was of average height. She was the type of girl that wouldn't leave a lasting impression, but she was staring intensely in his direction—once she noticed his line of sight though, she abruptly vanished.

He was a little curious about her behaviour, but since he didn't recognise her face, Raishin soon forgot about the girl as he returned to his conversation with Frey.

“Oh, right, she resembled Charl somewhat. Her face and build especially.”

“That's... Henri. Probably.”

“Henri? Isn't she a girl?”

“Henriette Belew.”

“You said Belew?”

In English, Henriette would be Henrietta. For her first name to be read in French, as well as having Belew as her family name— she was the same as Charl.

Like she had seen through Raishin's doubts, Frey quickly spoke.

“Henri is the T-Rex's younger sister, and also her roommate.”

“Seriously? Wait, before that, since when was her sister ever in the academy?”

“No, she wasn't. She only entered recently...”

It seemed a week ago, she had been enrolled into the gryphon dormitory out of the blue.

As a transfer student, as well as being the younger sister of the T-rex, you'd expect more rumours to have flown about. Raishin thought that his lack of knowledge was due to him being distant from Charl recently, but it looked like Frey didn't have many details as well.

“Huh, I did think they looked similar... But I didn't expect her to be Charl's sister.”

Their faces did look alike. However—

If he compared her to Charl, whose beauty was like an elegant fairy's, then Henri was more of a plain jane.

Her hair wasn't golden like Charl's, and the colours of their skin were slightly different as well. The difference between them was akin to both belonging to the Rosaceae family, but while Charl was a large flowered rose, her sister was a mere strawberry flower.

For some reason, he felt depressed. It was the same feeling as when an old wound was dug up.

"Henri has attempted suicide six times already. If we count what Raishin saw, then its seven times now."

"... Seven times?"

"The rope she tried to hang herself with broke, when she poisoned herself they were able to get the antidote to her in time, saving her..."

"Heh... So they were able to help her easily. I don't know if I should call that good or bad luck."

Even for the span of a week, attempting suicide seven times was way too many. How badly did she want to die anyway?

Raishin crossed his arms, deep in thought.

One of the basic qualifications required to enter the academy was, of course, being able to pay its fairly large tuition fees.

Although, this year being the year that the Night Party was being held, the number of applicants to the academy were few in number, and so the selection had been rather lenient... or so he heard. Because freshmen didn't have much battle experience, they would be at a disadvantage were they to fight. Even so, Charl's family was nobility that had fallen into ruin. They wouldn't have the money to throw around like that. That meant that there had to be a sponsor behind her.

Rather abruptly, he noticed that sitting on the bed next to him, Loki had a grim look on his face.

“Loki. Do you know something?”

“... If I may say so myself, I am a tolerant person, but people who spread baseless conjecture sicken me.”

That’s why I won’t say it— or that’s what it sounded like.

“What’s with that. Don’t start and then leave people hanging mid-sentence.”

“When did I start saying anything? Don’t put words in my mouth, idiot.”

“You’re the idiot. Always nit-picking and finding faults with minor slips of the tongue, you’re the textbook example of a big headed person. It’s so obvious you’re giving off such a strong aura that says ‘talk to me’.”

“What aura? You day-dreaming idiot, don’t mix your oriental delusions with something that doesn’t exist in the real world.”

“It’s a figure of speech. A literary device. And also, don’t make fun of the East you Western idiot.”

“Silence, world’s greatest idiot.” “Solar system’s greatest idiot.” “Milky way’s greatest idiot.” “Greatest idiot surpassing the fourth dimension!”

Veins popping, the two of them started squabbling like little children. Frey looked like she suddenly remembered something, and so said it out aloud to stop them from fighting.

“Ah... Speaking of the T-Rex. Ever since yesterday, she’s been missing.”

Raishin’s ears perked up. What did she say?

“She didn’t return to the dorms... The boarding master was in an uproar about it.”

Raishin didn't wait to hear the end. He jumped out of bed, and sprinted barefoot out of the ward.

(2)

A few minutes later, Raishin was in the lobby, having a heated conversation over the phone.

“That’s why I’m telling you, put Shouko on the line! I have something I need to confirm with her urgently!”

“Raishin, please calm down. The master is currently with the Major and— oh, master.”

It sounded like someone had snatched away the receiver on the other end. Almost immediately after, someone other than Irori was on the line.

“You’re so noisy, boy. I could hear you all the way from the next room.”

“Shouko!”

“You’re pretty slow in calling. I was worried after I heard the clock tower had been destroyed, you know.”

“... I’m sorry. The thought of contacting you hadn’t crossed my mind.”

“Well, it looks like nothing happened to you, and that is what’s important. Although it seems like you made Yaya do something reckless.”

Raishin gulped. Now that she mentioned it, he did almost jump to his death.

Not wanting to pursue the subject any further, and also since this wasn’t the time for such a conversation, Raishin hurriedly changed the subject.

“Also, well... I have a favour to ask of you.”

“Do I look like a fairy godmother to you?”

“Well... no, but...”

“You too, boy. You need to know your place.”

What Shouko meant by saying that was ‘Don’t get yourself tangled up in any more needless situations.’

Clearly, Shouko had seen through Raishin’s thoughts.

“Have you forgotten our wager? You don’t have the freedom to die as and when you like, remember?”

“... It’s not like this is something that will definitely put my life at stake here. I’m just going to look into things.”

“I suggest you quit.”

Shouko’s voice cracked. Having never had a reaction like this before, Rashin was at a loss for words.

“Return to your bed this instant. I will not tolerate any further talking back.”

Without giving him time to respond, the click of the phone indicated she had hung up.

Shouko was probably mad. Her voiced had been laced with irritation.

For that Shouko to be irritated... it wasn’t something that anyone could easily do. Even at a time like this, Raishin still felt a little pride that he had managed to get under her skin.

Though having said that, it was also the worst feeling ever. Raishin ground his teeth, and replaced the receiver.

“Raishin...”

He wasn’t sure when she had snuck up on him, but standing behind Raishin was an anxious Yaya.

“Shouko said ‘no’, didn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

“Great. Well then, be a good boy and return to the ward. If you’re really interested in where Charlotte disappeared off to, then Yaya will go search for her.”

“Start packing, Yaya. We’re going to get discharged from the hospital right now.”

Raishin abruptly turned on his heels, and hurriedly strode back into the ward.

“Eh— Wait, Raishin!”

Once inside the ward, Rashin stripped off his hospital clothing.

Swathed in bandages, parts of his chest peeked out from the within the white fabric. His abs could be clearly seen. Frey jumped up, red as a beetroot, and fled the room with Rabi.

While Loki eyed him suspiciously, Raishin changed into his school uniform. His right arm was moving as well as he wanted it to, and pain shot up his arm every time he moved it, so he had problems putting his shirt on. Seeing him like that, Yaya tried to help him, but since she was touching him in weird places, he poked her in the forehead to keep her away.

Once he had finished dressing himself, he went into the doctor’s office next door.

The full time doctor on duty, Dr Cruel, was heating soup in a beaker. The smell of consommé caused Raishin’s stomach to grumble. Waving off the aroma, he approached Cruel.

“Oh, it’s you. What’s with that outfit?”

Behind his glasses, the pupils of Cruel’s eyes twinkled with a sharp light in them. A chill ran down Raishin’s spine. For some reason he sensed this man wasn’t just an ordinary doctor.

“I don’t think it’s likely, but don’t tell me you want to be discharged now?”

“It’s doesn’t sound the same when the element of surprise is gone.”

“... Do you really understand the implications of what you are saying?”

Pushing up his glasses with a finger, Cruel stared at Raishin, like he was evaluating him.

“Well, I do welcome the idea of destroying guys. If I were to discharge you now, in other words—“

“I would be fit to take part in the Night Party again, right?”

“That’s right. You would once again become the 100th seat. From this very moment onward.”

Simply put, he would have to appear on the stage of the Night Party from tonight onwards.

And all this when Raishin couldn’t even change his clothes satisfactorily.

Raishin glanced over at Yaya. She was fidgety but kept quiet; like she was holding back something she wanted to say, staring at Raishin with a sad look in her eyes.

Raishin remained silent, and Cruel had a dumfounded look on his face.

“Really, you must be insane. I haven’t even removed your stiches yet. Overdo things now, and you’ll only worsen the wounds. Worst case scenario, your body will never be the same again.

“No, they’ve healed already. I’ll come again after a few days to remove the stiches.”

“Healed already, he says... well, speaking of that, that explosion earlier— no, I guess we still don’t know whether it really was an explosion. The important point is, the only thing destroyed was the clock tower.”

He suddenly changed the subject. Eyeing the doctor dubiously, Raishin listened on.

“One of the girls on the medical team told me about it. The one who’s responsible is supposed to be the T-Rex, Charlotte Belew.”

“—!”

“Hmph. You really can’t read an Oriental’s expression... is what I want to say, but that would be a lie. Your face betrays you. Who are you? Are you her boyfriend?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

Yaya flinched, having been struck by an invisible hammer blow.

Unsteadily stumbling on her feet, an instant later, she started to release a violently fierce killing aura. Her hair stood on end, waving around like a snake. Raishin hurriedly continued on.

“There, I’ve said that much, so now will you discharge me? Of course, it should be obvious I’m not her boyfriend.”

There was a long sigh. Cruel adopted a pose of resignation,

“Do as you like. You idiot.”

“That what I intended to. Thanks for taking care of me all this while.”

Raishin immediately turned around and walked out of the office.

Without even turning back, he stormed down the hallway.

“Wait, Raishin!”

Just as he reached the entrance, Yaya grabbed on to Raishin’s left arm.

“Clam down Yaya. You know that thing about being her boyfriend was a lie, right?”

“...I’ll get the details from you later. More importantly, why were you in such a hurry?”

“... I know that sort of feeling.”

His chest was hot. His breathing was strained. What he felt was uneasiness.

He had a premonition filled with despair and ruin. Very soon, he would no longer be able undo what had been done. Of that, he was sure.

That was when he was pushing through the black smoke, wandering about in the sea of fire.

It was the exact same feeling as that time when he searched for his sister, and lost her.

“Why are you... so vehement on helping her? Charlotte is someone who will one day stand before Raishin as an enemy to be defeated... And she’s a strong foe. Also, Raishin likes Shouko, don’t you? Since Shouko already told you no, why are you still—“

“... I... That is...”

“Please don’t forget your goal. And also... don’t forget your position.”

She was right; Raishin was just the dog of the military. His role in the academy, at least officially, was just a small part in the larger scheme of intelligence gathering.

On top of that, he wasn’t at liberty to use Yaya to go and brave danger, just because of his own selfishness. His role was to sneak into the Night Party, and spy on the latest Machinart developed by the major powers— and that was only after Shouko had mediated on his behalf. Even if there was a tacit understanding

between them that he could exact his revenge, he still couldn't overdo things here.

At that moment, he heard the loud bark of a dog.

Several dogs were gathered in the hallway, loudly panting. There were five of them. A collie, a german shepherd, a great dane, a dachshund, and a wolf-like dog. Their shoulders and feet were covered with armour. It was the Garm type automata.

Standing in the middle of the pack was Frey, who had an unusually sharp look on her face.

“You're looking for the T-Rex, right?”

“That's what I was planning to do...”

“I'll help too.”

Raishin thought about it for a brief moment.

Frey was a rival in the Night Party. Tonight they would clash, and maybe even one of them would be eliminated. Frey had a reason for participating in the battle, and it she wasn't going to give up the competition so easily. In fact, for her, the Night Party should have been her first priority.

He wanted Frey to give the Night Party her undivided attention. He thought so not as her rival, but as her friend.

However—

Raishin's gaze fell onto the dogs.

Every single one of them was a Bandoll. Even if they were just normal dogs, their searching ability would be without question. Plus, there were thirteen of them in total. Rather than just Raishin and Yaya searching, many hands would make light work.

Raishin weighed up whether he should refuse her help out of being obligated to her, or accept her kindness, and decided he would choose kindness.

“I’m in your debt then.”

Accepting Frey’s offer, he bowed to her in gratitude.

(3)

The Night Party executive committee was located on the 3rd floor of the great hall.

Decision making in the committee was done by three people; a professors’ representative, a student’s representative, and the director of the academy. To prevent the adults from influencing the process excessively, the student was appointed president of the committee to balance the power distribution.

And right now, a meeting was about to take place in a small hall.

In one corner of the hall, the professors’ representative was having a friendly chat with his assistant. A scarlet carpet ran across the floor, and wine red curtains hung from the walls. A large Victorian style round table was set in the centre. There were four chairs placed around it, and the president of the student body was already seated in one of them.

A triangular prism made of marble had the words “President Cedric Granville” inscribed upon it.

That was the name of the youth sitting in the chair. With a small body and slender frame, he looked almost like a girl instead. The air he gave off was one of aristocratic lineage. Crossing his legs elegantly, he was sipping black tea from a china cup.

The old doors opened, revealing a lone girl walking in.

Her features were plain and didn’t give any sort of lasting impression. However, there was a white dove resting on her shoulder, which made her stand out a little.

The youth placed his cup down, and beckoned the girl over towards him.

“Ah, you’ve returned, Ravena. I have a tidbit I’m certain you’ll find interesting. It’s regarding **Second Last**— it seems that somehow, he is dead set on searching for Charlottle Belew.”

Lowering his voice, he spoke softly such that only the girl could hear.

“It’s such a tear-jerker, really. A person so heavily injured working himself to the bone for the sake of a girl, who’s an ‘enemy’ he’ll have to face eventually in the Night Party. I must say, the T-Rex is unexpectedly popular.”

The girl’s shoulders trembled violently, and she glared wordlessly at the youth.

“I’m not letting you go after him.”

The girl’s eyes widened. It looked like the youth’s decision was extremely hard for her to accept.

“You understand, right? I’ve already said if you wander off halfway I’ll be very displeased.”

The youth grinned at her cheerily, but there was venom laced in that smile as he spoke.

“I mean, you’re already in trouble, you know? The forty hours we agreed upon is already up. And because of your idiotic failure, the situation has now taken a turn for the worse.”

The girl bit her lip, her stare wavering as she hesitated.

The youth chuckled lightly, then snapped his fingers.

In that instant, the girl’s body began to change.

Her hair and skin began to shed like the petals of a flower, revealing a new, fresher colour underneath.

Her hair shone with a gold colour, and her skin became dazzlingly white.

The dove on her shoulder began to morph into the shape of a steel coloured dragon.

Noticing the change, the professor looked over in her direction. The youth wore an surprised look on his face as he stared at the girl as well. The unwanted attention wasn't necessary. The girl hurriedly jumped out of the window.

Riding atop the huge dragon, she vanished upwards into the sky.

If anyone were to see her disappearing figure, they would without a doubt say that it was that of Charlotte Belew.

(4)

On the main street running through the academy—

Right in the centre, where the clock tower had once stood, the passage had been completely sealed off.

The tower had collapsed under its own weight, looking completely nothing like its original form. Now, it was just a mountain of rubble. Looking at it, it was hard to picture what it looked like back in its days of glory.

Faced with no other alternative, Raishin had to detour through the grove, heading south with the others in tow.

Yaya caught up to Raishin, and whispered into his ear.

“Raishin, if we keep walking in this direction, you know we'll end up in the Gryphon dormitory, right?”

“Yeah. First, we're gonna ask Charl's sister a few questions.”

Yaya's brow knitted together. Her displeasure was obvious.

“Her attitude yesterday wasn’t normal. She definitely knows something about Charl.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Call it a gut feeling. I’m good at reading people. Didn’t you know that?”

“Nope, Raishin is a dense person.”

Yaya rebutted him in a depressed tone of voice. Even Frey nodded pointedly in agreement.

A united warfront had sprung up between the girls at some point unknown to Raishin. He wondered when they suddenly get along so well. Raishin was a little chuffed at their response, but since them getting along was a good thing, he let it slide.

Suddenly, the atmosphere in the grove had changed. Wild, unkept weeds and natural vegetation gave way to neatly ordered trees, well groomed and trimmed. Walking on further, the white walls of the Gryphon dormitory came into view.

Reaching the front of the dormitory, a female came bursting out of the entrance.

She looked like she was in her mid-twenties. She had a gentle face, and looked quite refined.

She was most likely the boarding mistress. Keeping an eye on Raishin, she began to chastise Frey.

“Now look here. You can’t bring a boy into this place. Male students are prohibited from entering female dormitories.”

“Uu... That’s not it. We’re looking for Henri...”

The colour of the boarding mistress’s face changed. There was a strained tension in her voice as she said

“I see. Unfortunately, Henri has disappeared yet again.”

“Eh...”

“I’m going to search for her now. Hopefully nothing... weird will happen again.”

With a goodbye, she flusteredly ran off. Frey watched her go, then turned to face Raishin with a troubled look on her face. Raishin spun around on his heels,

“In all probability, it’s likely something that concerns her life. We better hurry and look for her too.”

“Hold on. Raishin... wait here a moment.”

Saying that, Frey disappeared into the dormitory without explanation.

Raishin and Yaya looked at each other. They didn’t understand the reason behind her action, but since she had left her precious dogs behind, she would surely be back soon.

They impatiently waited for her. Finally, after a few precious minutes had passed, Frey emerged from within.

Eight new faces were following behind her. Obviously, they were the Garm type automata.

“Sorry to keep you waiting...”

“You’re slow. Were you just gathering them?”

“No. I also brought this out...”

The thing that Frey removed from her pocket was white, with blue stripes running across it. It was a piece of cloth, made out of cotton and triangular in shape. Just by looking at it Raishin could tell it felt soft.



Having figured out what it was, Raishin found himself blushing uncontrollably.

“Why are you holding on to that!? Where did you even get it from!?”

“Henri’s room.”

“In other words, those are her panti... I mean, what are you planning to do with them?”

“This...”

Frey gathered all the dogs, and held out Henri’s underwear. The dogs began to sniff at it, and moments later all of them began to bark.

Frey blew a whistle. All the dogs save Rabi scattered. Confirming their mistress’s intent, the dogs ran off in different directions.

I see, tracking her by smell.

Seeing the glint of emotion in his eyes, Yaya clasped her hand over her mouth, taken aback.

“Raishin! If you want to sniff panties that desperately, then Yaya will—”

“I wasn’t thinking anything of the sort! You’re the only one perverted enough to think of that!”

After a moment, a howl could be heard in the distance.

Rabi slowly got up to his feet. Frey sat on his back.

“They’ve... found Henri.”

“What, already?”

Nodding, Frey started off on Rabi’s back. Raishin and Yaya hurriedly chased after them.

The intermittent howling continued in the distance. Slowly increasing in number, a harmony was eventually born.

Frey weaved between trees, never losing sight of the direction where the howling was coming from. Raishin willed his weakened legs onwards, trying his best to keep up with her.

The worst case scenario flashed through his mind.

What if the Henri the dogs found was nothing more than a dead body?

They arrived next to a small lake, which was located next to the practice battle field.

The dogs were at the base of a young evergreen oak, and had completely surrounded it. Once they noticed Frey, they stopped howling and began to wag their tails.

Up in the branches of the oak, there was a figure of a kitten-like maiden.

She had probably planned on hanging herself, for there was a rope tied to a branch. However, it looked like she didn't have the willpower to go through with it at the moment. The girl was hugging onto the trunk of the tree, bawling her eyes out.

"No—! Dogs—! Shoo... shoo, go away... someone help me!"

It was Henri screaming. That was good; it meant she was still alive.

Her trembling figure made her look exactly like a small animal. Even though she was going to kill herself just a few moments ago, now she was pathetically begging for help, not caring about what others would think of her.

Very briefly, a panicked Henri tried to stand up, but slipped off the branch.

Raishin hurriedly ran under her, barely managing to catch Henri in time. Using his knees to cushion the impact, he felt a bolt of pain run up his collarbone as she landed in his arms.

“No, no.... the dogs, the dogs!”

“Calm down. It’s ok. These fellas are completely domesticated; they won’t—“

“Hii! A man—!“

Violently pushing him away suddenly, Raishin was caught by surprise and tumbled over.

Henri hated dogs, but it looked like she hated men more.

Raishin got up, a little unhappy with her lack of gratitude for saving her, and stared at Henri.

Surrounded by thirteen dogs, she was on the verge of fainting.

“Hey, Henriette Belew—”

Hearing her name, Henri bolted upright in surprise.

“Where is Charl? Is it true she didn’t return to the dormitory last night? Does it have something to do with the destruction of the clock tower earlier? Why do you want to die so badly?”

Henri pulled her cap down, hiding her face behind it, and remained silent.

“Say something. If you know where Charl is currently, then—“

“Wait a moment, Raishin. You shouldn’t ask her all those questions at once.”

Strangely, Yaya had interrupted him. With a knowing look on her face, Yaya’s chest puffed out with pride as she said

“Please leave this to Yaya. Henriette, please answer honestly. You’re just faking all these suicide attempts so that you can catch Raishin’s attention, am I right—“

Raishin’s fist descended, silencing Yaya.

Yaya rubbed her head, with tears leaking from her eyes, but Raishin ignored her, turning to Frey and giving her a signal with his eyes. It looked like Henri hated him no matter what. Rather than continue his hard line of questioning, perhaps it would be better if a fellow female student were to try a softer approach.

His train of thought thus concluded, he wanted Frey to help. With a slight nod of her head,

“Uu... Henri. You’re just faking all these suicide attempts so that you can catch Raishin’s ate—“

Raishin’s fist descended once again, playing the straight man to her silly line.

Ignoring Frey, who was now rubbing her head in pain, Raishin strode up to Henri.

“No... a man... and a foreigner too!”

“You can’t escape. If you know where Charl is, tell me now.”

At those words, Henri shut her mouth tightly. That response— she knew something!

“Tell me! If you don’t, I’ll set the dogs on you!”

Reading the atmosphere, the Garm types began to bark loudly. Henri screamed in fright, before covering her head in her hands and wailing out loud.

“How can you derive pleasure from watching animals ravage a poor maiden, you sick demented freak!? Dear mother, I’m sorry... I... I’m about to lose my purity to beasts and a beast-like man!”

Suddenly, a cold killing intent blew over from behind Raishin, causing him to shiver involuntarily.

Like a clockwork doll, he slowly turned around. Standing behind him was a living, breathing demon, which would make even the scariest man-eating fiend flee in terror.

“Raishin... you... you had that kind of interest...”

“Now wait a min... Calm down Yaya. Think through this rationally.”

“Even though you won’t even give Yaya a kiss... that woman... you were going to... and with wild beasts...”

Something snapped inside Yaya.

“If you’re going to be stolen by other women, then Yaya would rather kill Raishin first, and then kill herself—!”

While bawling her eyes out, Yaya lunged forward, unleashing a heavy looking iron fist. Raishin narrowly dodged it; Yaya’s punch landed onto the oak tree instead, snapping it clean in half.

Cold sweat ran down Raishin’s back.
Wait... Yaya wasn’t joking?

Yaya was approaching him, swaying unsteadily on her feet. His life was flagrantly in danger! While he was distracted momentarily, Henri took the chance to flee like a frightened hare.

“Damn it! Frey, chase after her!”

However, there was no response. Feeling something was weird, Raishin turned around— and got the shock of his life.

A cold look which he had never seen before was now present in Frey’s eyes, and the person she was directing at was him.

“Raishin... you’re the worst... you pervert.”

In a voice almost like a whisper, she hid the dogs behind her back like she was trying to protect them from him.

To Frey, they were her important family. If she thought they were going to be used for deviant purposes, then of course she'd get angry. Raishin felt a migraine coming on, and the feeling of wanting to cry washed over him.

“Not you too! Don't get the wrong idea!”

It was useless. There was no way to clarify things to the two of them. Somewhere deep inside his heart, Raishin wished that Sigmund, or even Charl at the very least, was right next to him.

(5)

Yaya was lying on her back, while Raishin had sank down in a heap, both of them panting wildly.

Since Yaya was a bandoll, she could generate magic energy by herself. However, even with that said, the energy she generated wasn't infinite. Running out of magic energy, she became exhausted.

Yaya was still sniffing, but more importantly, she had calmed down. A relieved Raishin turned towards Frey, who was sitting in the shade and grasping her knees.

“You also should have been more reasonable ok? I'm not a pervert or anything like that.”

“Uu... I believe you.”

“Don't lie! You're doubting me with all your heart now, aren't you!?”

“Should I chase after Henri?”

Frey's cheeks coloured slightly as she returned back to the topic at hand.

“I know where she is now... Revina is currently following her.”

“Oh, well done. But I think... we can leave Henri aside for now.”

Frey tilted her head in puzzlement.

“The way she is right now, she’s definitely not going to tell us anything. Trying to force it at this point would be a waste of time.”

“But if we leave her alone, she might try to commit suicide again....”

“Perhaps. However, I think she’ll be fine.”

“...?”

“That’s why I’m saying, we need to search for Charl first.”

On hearing Charl’s name, Yaya jumped up.

“But Raishin, we have no clue as to where Charlotte could be. Even if you said you were her boyfriend.”

“Don’t hold a grudge over that. Forget I ever said it, alright?”

“Since you said search for her, does it mean you have an idea where to begin?”

“I won’t say I have a definite idea on where to look, but I think that Charl... is most likely still somewhere inside the academy.”

“Is this the gut feeling of a boyfriend?”

“I already told you not to get hung up on that. It’s not exactly a gut feeling... it’s more like wishful thinking.”

Raishin stood up abruptly, dislodging sand from the ground. Frey also rose to her feet,

“Should I get the T-Rex’s panties then?”

“Don’t fixate over underwear.”

“Then, her bra...”

“Promise me! Say you’ll stop fixating on people’s underwear!”

Frey was a little unhappy, but trotted off to fetch something back to begin their hunt.

“Ah, wait.”

Raishin looked up between the gaps of the tree branches, speaking while noticing the colour of the sky.

“It’s almost time for the Night Party. You should go back.”

Frey needed to manage and maintain her dogs. Since there were thirteen of them, just feeding them alone would be a formidable task. He didn’t even want to think how she would bring them to use the toilet.

“... Then what will you do, Raishin?”

“I’ll search for Charl. Don’t worry, once the sun sets, I’ll head over there.”

“But...”

“It’s fine. Sorry for asking you to tag along the whole day.”

With great reluctance, Frey hopped onto Rabi’s back and departed. The other dogs gathered into a pack and chased after them.

“That looks like something straight out of a myth. Walking away with all those dogs in tow.”

“So in short, you’re saying Frey is a goddess, Raishin...”

Yaya kicked at a small rock. Raishin chuckled, then placed his hand on her head.

“You’re my only goddess. I’m counting on you, my goddess of victory.”

“Raishin... <3”

“And also, I guess Shouko’s also a goddess, but in a different way.”

“Yaya would be fine being that sort of goddess too...”

A rather crushed Yaya muttered that in anguish, lacking her usual vigour.

“Now then, even though I said let’s search for her, where should we begin...”

Raishin gently tapped his fist to his jaw, deep in thought.

If Charl was really still within the academy grounds, she’d be in a place that would be hard to find; a place where neither the security staff, the committee members, or even the professors could find her. He wondered if there was even such a place inside the academy.

(Hm. If I asked Professor Kimberly for help, would she be willing to hear me out?)

That seemed like the best choice he had for now. Considering that Kimberly also had some clout inside the Mages’ Association... or at least, it seemed that way. Although it meant he’d have to suffer her sarcasm while also owing her another favour, there was some merit in talking to her.

Other than that, what else could he do...

“... Alright. First, we’ll head over to the Gryphon dormitory.”

“Are you planning to steal Charlotte’s panties?”

“I’m not that kind of pervert. I just want to search around Henri’s side of the room.”

“Eh, but just now you said we weren’t going to search for Henri... Ah, I get it. I will follow you Raishin, even if it’s into another woman’s bed.”

“We’re going nowhere near that, ok? Plus, that’s not following, that’s stalking.”

In any case, the two of them started off towards their goal.

The sun was already setting, and so the inside of the woods had become a little dark.

Raishin stumbled over the thick grass and roots of trees, but continued to run with dropping his speed.

About halfway enroute to the dormitory, suddenly, the trees in front of them began to rustle.

Someone's presence could be felt— it was strong— and large!

“Yaya, stop!”

Holding his partner back, Raishin ground to a sudden halt.

Almost immediately after, the wind above their heads began to howl.

Its tail sweeping away tree branches, a large creature descended from above.

With a thud, the creature landed heavily on the ground, revealing itself to be a steel coloured dragon with four wings.

It was clear this wasn't a wild beast; the look in its eyes gave off the feeling that it possessed a bright intellect. Its dignified figure was filled with greatness and beauty, making it hard to describe it as a monster.

There was a girl sitting on the dragon's back.

Charlotte Belew.

One of the few who could be considered as having the potential to be the next Wiseman, and the person whom Raishin frequently ate lunch with.

Rather than her normal school uniform, Charl was clad in black. While she wasn't wearing a suit of armour and a helmet, her chest and her shoulders, as well as her other vital points were covered in protective armour. An assassin or someone in the military would not look out of place in the get up she was wearing. This was clothing meant for battle.

Yaya eyed her carefully, although not in the way she normally would, before stepping in front of Raishin. Raishin held her back, walking in front of the dragon by himself.

“Yo. Skipping class to take a walk? Didn’t think you were the sort who’d enjoy the nightlife.”

He hailed her in the same carefree voice he always did.

“I have a mountain of questions for you. Let’s go somewhere for a drink.”

“... Unfortunately for you, I have nothing to say.”

Charl response was cold and curt. It was like she had completely lost all emotion— like her face was made of steel. She continued on in her expressionless tone.

“I’m warning you. Don’t try and make a pass at Henri.”

“I refuse.”

For a brief moment, there was a flicker of irritation on her face as her emotionless façade slipped.

“However, if you just return to the academy, I’ll consider it. How’s that?”

“... Idiot. Such an amazing idiot. As always, you’re unable to read the context.”

A killing look gleamed within Charl’s eye.

“I’m telling you to not get involved with me.”

Charl’s body was filled with a strong magic energy, causing the atmosphere around her to waver.

Her intensity was terrifying. Combined with the overpowering aura the enormous dragon was releasing, Raishin could feel his hair stand on end.

“If you don’t comply— I’ll kill you.”

Yaya’s eyes widened, then she quickly snuck a peek at Raishin.

Raishin shrugged his shoulders, and spoke in a bemused tone of voice.

“Didn’t you say that you were going to protect me just the other day?”

“Shut up! I said I’ll kill you so I will! That’s why I’m telling you not to get yourself involved with me anymore!”

The expressionless mask she was wearing had completely cracked. Turning her face away, she kicked the sides of the dragon.

The dragon lifted itself into flight with an ease that belied its enormous size. Climbing higher and higher, it eventually flew out of sight.

All that was left was the strong gust of wind, and some scattered vegetation blowing around.

“... You’re the idiot, Charl.”

Raishin sighed, before a smile carved itself onto his face.

“How can I walk away when you’re making a face like that in front of me?”

Chapter 2 – Overture of Ruin

(1)

Seven days ago, Charl was violently and noisily pacing around her room.

She would walk to the door, stop, and turn back before performing another U-turn.

Her foot clipped the table, causing the mountain of textbooks on it to collapse.

This woke Sigmund up from his afternoon nap, and he yawned as he rose up from the bed.

“If you’re that worried, you should go see how Raishin’s doing.”

“Wha- I- You— I’m n-n-not worried about him at all!”

“You’ve already put off studying for three days. Doesn’t that mean you can’t concentrate?”

“J-j-just because that’s true doesn’t mean you can jump to that conclusion. Don’t stretch the truth. I couldn’t be bothered in the least about that idiot’s condition. With his constitution, that idiot will be just fine. Besides... no visitors are allowed in there in the first place.”

“I’m sure if you asked Miss Kimberly she’d help you. Since it’s coming from you, she won’t say no.”

“W-w-why do I have to go so far for someone like him?”

Crossing her arms, she turned her head away.

“Stop being so stubborn. If a friend’s injured, it’s only natural to be concerned. The more obstinate you remain, the more your true feelings show.”

“... True feelings?”

“You’re finally recognising Raishin as a male, no?”

“Wha— There’s no way that’s possible. Don’t say such strange things, or I’ll change your lunch from chicken to herring cans. You irritating dragon!”

“See, you’re trying to deny it vehemently. And why is that?”

“I’m not vehemently denying—“

Charl all the more tried to rebut Sigmund, but stopped.

Sigmund was with Charl at all times. On top of that, he had been with her ever since she was born. When it came to her, Sigmund could easily see right through her.

“... I mean, what if I somehow end up liking him—”

Having realised what she had just said, Charl exploded.

“This is just a hypothetical situation! A work of fiction! We’re simply talking about the possibility of it happening!”

“Yes, yes, I get it. For argument’s sake, let’s say you have some good will towards him, so what?”

“Wouldn’t that... make me seem like an... easy girl?”

Slowly but steadily, the outer corner of her eyes were tinged with moisture. Charl looked like she was on the verge of tears, but at the same time she might have been angry. To Sigmund, she was staring at him with a strange face.

“Hm. You humans have your own hardships to go through. However, your concern—“

At that moment, the door opened with a click, the person not bothering to knock.

While pushing a pushcart, the gentle-natured boarding mistress entered.

“Oh, Charl. Still not leaving your room? It’s been three days already, you know?”

“Miss Zeth— what is that? A trunk?”

“You should be happy. You’re finally getting a roommate!”

“Wha— Please don’t decide that for me all of a sudden! How can you suddenly spring a roommate on me out of nowhere!”

“I will not tolerate back talk, young lady. The Gryphon dormitory rules state that one room is to be shared between two girls.”

“But I’ve always been by myself all this while!”

“That’s because you’ve always been causing trouble, haven’t you? You pushed Ravena out of the window, then you made Nancy cry.”

“Uu... But!”

“Calm down. I’m sure you’ll like the new girl. — Come in!”

In a sing-song voice, she called out to the hallway.

Eventually, almost apologetically, a young girl timidly entered.

She looked very shy. Her cap was pulled down past her eyes, like she was trying to hide her flaxen hair.

Upon seeing the girl’s face, Charl literally jumped towards her.

“Henri!”

She couldn’t believe it. Cutting in front of the boarding mistress, she dashed towards the girl.

She extended her hands out fearfully. Her fingertips touched flesh. It wasn’t an illusion.

“Are you ok!? Did anything happen to you!? Where have you been all this time!? How’s mother!? Why are you at the academy— why are you my roommate!?”

“Calm down, Charl. Your behaviour would make anyone, to say nothing of Henri, uncomfortable.”

Sigmund rebuked her. Flapping his wings, he landed on Charl’s head.

“Long time no see, Henri. How are you feeling?”

Henri’s nervousness eased a little. She smiled ever so slightly.

“Long time no see, Sigmund...”

“I’m glad to see you’re fine. Charl has been worrying about you for so long.”

Charl turned her head away, but Sigmund forced it back.

As he did so her tears scattered into the air, sparkling as they hit the floor.

“S-sis...?”

“... It’s fine for me to cry, ok? There’s nothing strange about it!”

Finally unable to hold herself back, she embraced Henri tightly.

She had grown a little, but her smell, and the feeling of hugging her told Charl this was Henri.

She was alive. She was alive and now she was here...!

While being hugged, Henri had also extended her arms around Charl’s back at some point in time.

At first, she was a little reserved, but eventually, her embrace grew tighter.

Both Sigmund and the boarding mistress stared affectionately at the two sisters locked in their embrace.

“Ok, what happened to you? Why are you at the academy now?”

Henri’s face instantly clouded over. Pushing herself away from Charl, she grew distant.

“... I’m here to fulfil a role.”

“A role? What kind? Why did you come here?”

Henri closed her eyes tightly, before muttering in anguish.

“I’m here... to bring misfortune upon you.”

(2)

After Sigmund had flown away, Raishin remained standing where he was for a moment.

He looked up into the tree where Yaya was. She was perched on a branch with one hand over her brow, staring far into the distance.

“How’s it, Yaya?”

“I’m sorry, Raishin. I do not see them anywhere anymore.”

Raishin tilted his head slightly. Considering Sigmund’s massive body, he stood out like a sore thumb. Theoretically, the number of places where he could hide himself should be limited, right...?

“Alright, in that case let’s search for them on foot.”

Lightly landing on the ground, Yaya looked up at Raishin with a difficult expression on her face.

“But Yaya isn’t allowed outside school grounds...”

“Don’t worry. We’re only going to be searching within the academy.”

“— So you really think Charlotte is inside the academy after all?”

“If she escaped to somewhere far away, her flight would be noticed by someone for sure. Since she disappeared so quickly, it means she must have landed somewhere nearby.”

“But what if she was using a magic art to conceal her presence, like Komurasaki’s Yaegasumi?”

“Of course, I’m aware of that possibility. However, if that’s the case...”

“... If that’s the case?”

“Then it’s hopeless. We won’t be able to do anything.”

If she was hiding outside the school, the field of search would widen and there would be too much ground for him to cover alone. Therefore, he was betting on the probability that she was still inside the academy.

Just as he started to walk off, Raishin suddenly scanned the surroundings with a sharp look in his eyes.

“Raishin? What’s the matter?”

“... I thought someone was... No, it’s nothing. Let’s go.”

With Yaya in tow, he ran off in the direction Sigmund had flown.

Raishin didn’t even stop to eat as several hours passed as they continued their search.

Even after dusk had fallen, they continued to search for any traces of Sigmund by the light of a lamp. Considering Sigmund’s massive body, the ground would be disturbed and grass would be trampled when he transformed.

However, they were unable to find even a single trace.

Yaya looked up at the night sky, before worriedly turning around to face Raishin.

“Raishin... It’s time.”

She had a drowsy expression in her eyes, and was forcefully trying to keep her eyelids open.

“Are you tired?”

“No. Yaya is a puppet built by Shouko, so my body’s sturdier than Raishin.”

She laughed in panic. However, Raishin knew she was actually quite feeble.

“... Ok, let’s return to the Night Party then. Sorry, but I’ll be counting on you for this as well.”

“Ok. Leave it to Yaya.”

She nodded, relieved. So she really was tired after all.

Raishin looked up at the sky, using the position of the stars to navigate. With the loss of the clock tower, he could no longer pinpoint his exact location, and he found it inconvenient.

“This way. We better hurry, it’s going to be eleven soon.”

“Tonight the 87th seat enters the fight. Do you think Frey will have defeated him by now?”

“We’ll find out when we get there.”

Exiting out from the grove of trees, he found himself facing a well maintained garden. Cutting across it, he headed north along the main street.

Along the way, he spotted the remains of the clock tower.

Even though it was this late, a large number of students had gathered around it. The mountain of rubble had been cordoned off with a rope, and disciplinary committee members were keeping watch over the site. There were also quite a few normal students mixed in with them.

The students were standing there, dumfounded. Looking closer, he spotted a few female students crying as well.

It was like a funeral. As an outside, Raishin didn’t get it, but even then it was clear to him that this wasn’t just an ordinary clock tower. Most likely, this had been the symbol of the academy.

With complicated feelings in his chest, he passed by them.

Shortly after, he passed by the medicine and law faculties, reaching the field of battle.

The gas lights lighting up the place were dazzlingly bright, but as expected of the current time, the gallery was sparsely filled. The Stonehenge like field of battle was completely deserted though.

“Frey isn’t here. Did she leave already?”

“Who knows? Don’t let your guard down though, during the Night Party, we’re both enemies to each other.”

Yaya frowned uneasily, looking at Raishin with upturned eyes.

“Raishin... if we were to fight Frey now...”

“Yeah, I know, it would be tough. I’m still worn out because someone attacked me during the afternoon.”

“Uu...” Yaya fell silent at that. She looked like she felt responsible for that, and visibly deflated.

Normally, Frey was accompanied by her thirteen Garm-types. During a battle though, she’d just control five. Raishin was still unable to fully grasp the Sonic magic circuit, so if they did end up fighting, there was a legitimate danger that he would be knocked out.

Having said that though, it was inevitable that they would have to clash someday.

Eavesdropping on the scraps of conversation in the gallery, he vaguely understood the situation. Tonight’s guest of honour— the 87th seat still hadn’t shown up.

“**Second Last** has entered the field of battle at 10:55pm.”

In a booming voice not unlike an opera singer, the female executive committee member announced his entrance.

Standing in the middle of the field, he waited for his opponent to arrive while the night wind continued to blow.

Who was the 87th seat? He couldn't remember.

He realised he should have done his homework on the enemy. Usually, if Charl was here, she would feed him information about his opponent without fail.

(It's almost like she's my manager or something...)

Charl had a list of all the Night Party entrants, with detailed information on all hundred participants.

With a start, he suddenly realised Yaya's eyes were like a bottomless lake as she stared up at him.

"Raishin... You were thinking about Charlotte..."

"How did you know?"

Yaya didn't answer, giving him a smile instead.

Raishin was surprised. What was with that smile? It was beyond scary.

He waited in fear— no, irritation for an hour.

In the end, the 87th seat didn't appear, and it became midnight.

Since the clock tower was destroyed, there was no chime of the bell. A student from the executive committee rung a hand held bell to signal the end of the contest. Raishin relaxed, his tension dissipating.

The students in the gallery yawned as they departed. Giving a sidelong glance to the executive committee members who were cleaning up the area, Yaya breathed a sigh of relief.

"It's a good thing nothing happened in the end. Raishin, you should hurry back to the dorm and rest."

"No. I'm not going back yet."

While saying that, he started walking.

“Eh? Please wait a minute. Where are you going?”

“Well, there’s a girl I want to see before I go to bed.”

There was a weird snapping sound as Yaya suddenly ceased all movement.

“Wait... Yaya? It’s not what you think, ok? I just wanted to make it sound cool—
Wait! Calm down!”

His eyes widened rapidly. Before Yaya could do anything to him, Raishin broke into a dash, sprinting away from danger.

(3)

Inside one of the rooms in the Gryphon dormitory, just after midnight.

Henri was sitting up on her bed hugging her knees, without switching on the light.

Charl’s room was extremely big, even though it was just meant for two people. There were two double sized beds, and a table set for four. There was a large desk for studying and enough bookshelves to rival a library, as well as two comfortable looking sofas. All were provided by the dormitory.

There were thirteen automata protecting the place— with such an excessive security detail, safety was all but assured. It was very much like the drawing room that Henri used to spend her time in when she was young.

Moonlight was streaming in from the open window, falling onto the desk. A pincushion, embroidery spool of thread and a pair of sewing scissors were illuminated by the light, revealing Charl’s fondness for sewing. Remembering this unexpected side of her sister caused Henri to smile unintentionally.

Her eyes fell onto the sewing scissors.

The solemn gleam of metal and it’s cold, sharp blade stood out.

Swallowing her saliva, Henri got off the bed.

Moving like she irresistibly being drawn to it, her hand stretched out for the scissors like it was sucking her in.

The scissors felt heavy and sturdy in her hand.

The scissors glittered beautifully. Henri's breathing spontaneously grew wilder.

It was a tool meant for cutting. As an object, its sole purpose was to cut and cut only. Henri held it to her neck. It wasn't meant to be used for cloth, but skin, muscle, veins—

“Henri! No!”

Suddenly, her arms were restrained with great force.

The boarding mistress had entered the room at some point in time, and was tightly holding on to Henri's arms.

“L-let go!”

“No, I can't do that!”

With great ease, the boarding mistress removed the scissors from Henri's hand.

Henri sank down onto the floor, large drops of tears falling from her face.

“Just let me die... please...!”

“I won't let you die!”

But it wasn't the boarding mistress who rejected Henri's entreaty.

From outside the open window, another girl's voice entered inside the room.

The room was three stories high. Yet the girl's voice was clearly emanating from outside. Straddling atop a dragon, her flowing golden hair fluttered in the wind as she stared straight at Henri with fire in her eyes.

Charl kicked off Sigmund's back, leaping lightly through the window.

“Charl!”

As Charl drew closer to Henri, The boarding mistress stood in between them with an angry look on her face.

“You’ve finally returned. What were you doing, silently running off into the night like that?”

“... I’m sorry, Miss Zeth. There was something I had to do no matter what.”

“I expect you to tell me your story later in full detail. I’ll have to report this to the higher ups after all.”

After saying that, the stern look on her face relaxed, and she stepped aside.

Charl pulled her shoulders back, and marched up to Henri with bold steps.

Henri had turned her back in fear. Charl faced her,

“Don’t do something so stupid!”

She suddenly shouted at her— then embraced her tightly.

“Don’t... do something... so stupid... please...”

Charl’s voice was shaking.

It wasn’t just her voice though. Her shoulders and arms were also trembling with anxiety.

“... You said you were here to bring misfortune upon me. But for me to meet my sister and know that my mother is still alive— how can you call that

misfortune!?”



Feeling her sister desperately clinging to her back, Henri broke down.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry... I’m so sorry...”

“You don’t have anything to worry about. Everything will be settled tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry...!”

“Don’t apologise. Once everything’s over, we can live together once again. Ok?”

She was unable to endure it anymore. Henri grabbed onto Charl’s hands as she continued to sob.

Charl continued to hug those slender shoulders tightly.

Under the cover of night, someone was spying on them.

Outside the window, beyond the hovering Sigmund, he was perched on a branch of a large tree in the garden.

Reclining against the trunk, the shadow had his arms folded. Even though it was night, he was hiding his eyes behind tinted glasses. His hair was dyed platinum blonde, his body was toned and he had a fearless look on his face.

The man was giving off a strange presence, but it was extremely faint. Even someone like Sigmund wasn’t able to detect his presence.

Upon seeing the situation unfold inside the room, he silently vanished.

He made a jumping movement, but there was no reaction from the branch whatsoever.

The only thing left behind was silence.

(4)

In the end, Raishin’s game of hide and seek with Yaya continued all the way to the physics faculty building.

Upon reaching the entrance, the both of them sank down onto the floor.

“Why are you running away, Raishin..?”

“Because you’re chasing after me!”

“But that’s because Raishin ran away first!”

They both spoke in between gasps for air. As their voiced died down and their breathing became regular again, their ears were assaulted by a deafening silence.

The lights were all out. As expected of the current time, there wasn’t a single soul in the hallways.

Raishin stood up and started to walk down the hallway, relying on his fuzzy memory to guide him.

Going up the stairs, he reached the topmost floor, which was set aside exclusively for the professors. He could feel the presence of others, but surely they weren’t spirits and just enthusiastic researchers... right?

Walking down the faintly illuminated hallway, he stopped in front of a certain room.

He checked the name on the plate. The name of the girl he wanted to meet was inscribed upon it.

Knocking on the door, there was a muffled “Enter”, and Raishin opened the door.

Stepping inside, if he had to describe the room in a single word, it would be a ‘nest’.

The room was in a total mess. Even though the resident of the room was best described as an orderly person, there were stacks of academic journals piled up high everywhere. Documents and notes were scattered about. There were bookshelves as well, the books not only placed vertically, but some were turned horizontally and crammed into any empty spaces. There were so many books some of them had been stacked atop the sofa.

“What do you want at this time of the night?”

Spinning around in her chair, the owner of the nest— the room turned to face him.

White coat and red hair, it was Kimberly the professor.

“I have something I need to ask the professor about.”

“So, you’ve finally awoken to the joys of studying— like that’s even possible. Well, I was expecting you to drop by sooner or later anyway. Have you recovered already?”

“Yeah. I’m completely fine now.”

He laughed like his lie had just been exposed. However, Kimberly chose not to lecture him on his recklessness.

“Let’s hear your question. Yaya. There’s a pot over there you can use to make tea.”

“Ah, ok.”

The pot was on top of the table. Pushing aside the cans, bottles and boxes of snacks that were on the table, Yaya carefully retrieved the pot so as to not topple over the mountain of books.

“Have a seat, **Second Last**. —So, what is it?”

“While you’re a professor at the academy, you’re also someone from the magic association.”

Taking a seat on the dusty sofa, he opened with a surprise attack-like statement.

“The reason why my illegal excursion was covered up and Frey and Loki’s automata not confiscated was thanks to you, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t see any point in hiding it now. However, it’s not knowledge I’d like to be carelessly thrown about. If you leak my secret, you can expect all the same favours I’ve been giving you to dry up.”

“I’m in your debt. Therefore you can rest assured it’ll go with me to my grave.”

“Oh, how admirable. That’s so unlike you.”

“It’s totally like me. As you can see, I am a man of honour.”

“I wish you’d take that attitude and apply it to your exams.”

Raishin made a face that looked like someone had just crammed his mouth full of mustard.

“Continue. What is it you want to ask me?”

There was a sharp gleam in Kimberly’s eyes. Raishin felt like he didn’t need to waste time on a preface with her. Jumping straight to the point, he asked her,

“Is Charl being controlled by someone?”

“Oh? You don’t think she destroyed the clock tower of her own volition?”

“She’s excessively violent, tends to overdo things, and frequently relies on Sigmund’s strength.”

While staring straight at Kimberly, Raishin continued with conviction in his voice.

“But she isn’t the sort who would use Sigmund’s power to kill!”

“... But those are the facts of the matter. Charlotte was the one who destroyed the clock tower.”

“How many deaths were there?”

“Thankfully, zero. But there were a number of injuries.”

“See, she isn’t the sort that would kill... So, who was the target?”

“You’re being unusually sharp today. We’re still in the middle of investigating, but most likely—“

She drew slightly closer to him and lowered her voice to a whisper.

“It was the headmaster, Edward Rutherford.”

Raishin’s eyes widened in shock. Even Yaya, who was bringing tea over, gasped in surprise.

“... Does Charl have some sort of grudge against the headmaster?”

“Nope. It’s most likely as you said, someone is using her.”

“Who?”

“Who do you think it is?”

She answered his question with another question. Kimberly looked like she was trying to test him.

Raishin had no idea on the inner workings of the academy. But Kimberly didn’t seem the type to set unanswerable questions. In that case, did he already know the answer...?

Raishin was deep in thought. If the headmaster were to die, who would benefit the most?

Within the scope of his limited knowledge, the only one who could possibly be bearing a grudge against the headmaster was—

“Felix... I see, the Kingsfort family...”

Kimberly grinned like a cat, nodding in satisfaction.

“That’s an extremely possible theory.”

“But that’s ridiculous!”

“That’s not true. For example— during the afternoon ceremony, a secret messenger from the Kingsfort family snuck in and had a secret meeting with the headmaster.”

Kimberly’s affirmation must have had a hidden meaning behind it.

“A secret messenger... what’s that?”

“As its name implies, it’s a messenger carrying a secret communique. Recently, there has been a lot of conversations going on behind closed doors. It looks like something happened between the British government and the headmaster.”

“... No matter how you look at it, that’s strange. If they were to target someone, why not target me?”

The person who brought shame to the famous house of Kingsfort was Raishin. Instead of killing the headmaster, it would be better if they ordered his death instead, thus getting revenge on both Charl and Raishin at the same time.

“That’s too simple for revenge.”

Playing with her cup of red tea, Kimberly rebuked him.

“Listen closely, **Second Last**. Unlike you, who are driven by emotion at any given time, adults first evaluate something before deciding whether to act.”

“... What’s this something?”

“Benefit.”

As vulgar as it sounded, she was absolutely right.

“If they were to kill you, they would be able to pull it off without any trouble. However, doing so will not profit them whatsoever. If you were Kingsfort, what would be the number one thing you wanted the most?”

“... Reinstatement?”

“Exactly. Restoring the honour of their name means that Sir Walter will be able to reenter the political world. In order to do so, first they have to ‘erase’ the reason for their fall.”

He understood. If he looked at the chains of events leading up till now with this new viewpoint in mind...

“It was the headmaster who denounced Felix as Cannibal Candy.”

“That’s right. It might have been my analysis that confirmed it, but the person who exposed Felix’s crimes and publicly denounced them was the headmaster. Even my judgment is now being said as to have been influenced by the headmaster’s intentions.”

“So if they can’t buy him off— they want to erase him and spread a conspiracy theory? That’s stupid. Assassinating the headmaster is the same as admitting their guilt.”

“The point is to make something that was black and white into a grey area, even if they have to resort to crude and rough measures to do so. In fact using rough methods may be even more effective in terms of silencing the cowards out there from raising suspicion.”

Raishin ground his inner teeth. This was unpleasant to admit, but justice had no power in this world. Instead, the ones who had power were considered justice.

“The Kingsforts are renowned as philanthropists, and they’re a well-liked family. On the other hand, ever since that scandal a few years back, the Belews have been a despised house—“

“Scandal?”

“You didn’t know? During a hunting trip with the crown prince, the count’s prized dog automaton ran wild, and mauled prince Edmund to within an inch of his life.”

“—!”

“The Belew house is an enemy of the Royal Family. Also, public opinion can be so fickle. Show the slightest hint of inconsistency, and they’ll fill in the rest of the blanks with that they want to think.”

“On top of that, if Charl was exposed as the culprit...”

“It would be a complete reversal in terms of who the villain is. If you can make the people who wrote about the scandal look like ‘tabloid hacks who spewed rubbish’, then all their political opponents would become ‘fools who got manipulated by the media.’ Kingsfort would be able to silence dissenting voices across the board, and return back to their social position and possibly bloom even brighter than before.”

Raishin clenched his fists so hard his nails dug into his skin.

His powerlessness felt like a punch to the gut. He finally realised why Shouko had forbade all his actions. Raishin was merely a small individual. A helpless and weak existence.

Watching him with a cool gaze, Kimberly coldly spoke.

“**Second Last.** Wash your hands off this matter.”

“Wha—?!”

“Don’t let the blood rush to your head. You’ll end up making bad judgements. Eventually, one of those bad judgments will end up costing you your life.”

“How can I back out now!? If the Kingsforts are making their move, all the more reason for me to—“

“I despise idiots. You still don’t get it? I’m telling you, you have no evidence to back it up.”

Raishin felt cold sweat pouring down his head.

She was right. There wasn't even a shred of evidence that could link the Kingsfort family to this case, and there was no evidence that Charl was being controlled either.

“What I've just told you is merely conjecture. If you stirred up an incident just because your emotions got the better of you, then you'd put the Belew sisters in a disadvantageous position. Do you understand now?”

“ ... ”

“Go cool your head off, and act more like an adult. This is no time for childish behaviour.”

“... In that case, its fine as long as I have evidence, isn't it?”

Their gazes clashed.

Kimberly looked at Raishin, who was looking straight at her, like she was trying to ascertain something. Finally,

“That's right. If you had evidence, then there would be no problem.”

She laughed as she spoke in an instigative tone of voice.

(5)

Leaving the building, Raishin and Yaya were finally heading back to the dormitory.

It was one in the morning. The harsh night wind was still blowing at this time. The dampness in the cold air caused him to duck his head down reflexively.

Yaya looked fine. She was strangely in a good mood, almost bouncing as she took a few steps in front of him.

“It's been a long time since we've been back in the dorm, hasn't it?”

“Yeah.”

“Doesn’t this feel somehow nostalgic?”

“Yeah.”

“The dormitory is not a public space, right?”

“Yeah, but if you try something weird I’ll kick you out, ok?”

“... Tch.”

“Did you just click your tongue? You just blatantly did it, didn’t you?”

“But it’s been so cold recently... Yaya will freeze if she’s left all alone.”

“Don’t lie! You got guts saying that, considering you removed your clothes without even batting an eyelid!”

Emerging from the tunnel of trees, they reached the Tortoise dormitory.

By now, even the industrious boarding master was fast asleep. Obviously, this meant the entrance was locked... But Raishin had a spare key. It was one of the privileges of being a glove bearer— a Gauntlet.

Relocking the door upon entering, he headed towards his room.

It was his own castle where he felt strangely calm inside. Taking his painkillers, he changed out of his uniform and brushed his teeth. The painkillers soon kicked in, a wave of drowsiness assailing him.

Resisting the sandman’s call, he reclined in a chair and started to think.

He went over what Kimberly had just told him.

“Are you still up, Raishin? Please hurry up and go to sleep.”

“Yeah, I will as soon as you get out of my bed.”

Yaya reluctantly got off his bed and climbed into her own.

In her place, he dived under the covers of his bed. His sheets and the spot where Yaya had lain felt warm because of her body heat. Letting out a pleasant sigh of relief, Raishin finally closed his eyes.

Feeling his consciousness drift away, he murmured to the bed opposite him.

“... Yaya, about this afternoon’s question. Why am I so desperately trying to help Charl— even after Shouko’s reprimand.”

He felt a sharp intake of breath on the other side. Yaya was tensed up.

“I’m not too sure of the reason myself.”

“... Eh?”

“I’m not attracted to Charl. Sigmund is without a doubt, a formidable opponent, and if he were to be gone it might actually work to our advantage. However, if they’re in trouble, then I want to help them.”

“Raishin...”

“It’s not just Charl, but Frey too. Obviously, that includes you as well. Loki— well, our past differences aside, he’s also someone I’d help. I guess I really have to help Charl after all. Besides...”

Henri was weighing heavily on his mind.

He felt an affinity with her. As someone who also had a superior elder sibling, he had some warped sympathy for her, since he felt she resembled him closely. Maybe that was an arbitrary misunderstanding on his part, but still...

“Tomorrow, we’re going to look for Henri again.”

“Henriette? Not Charlotte?”

“Charl said it herself, ‘don’t get involved with her’. Unfortunately for her I am an antagonistic devil.”

“Ok. Yaya will do as Raishin says then.”

Yaya meekly complied.

Trying to dispel her gloom, Raishin had a gentle tone in his voice as he continued.

“Sorry for always saddling you with troublesome things.”

“Don’t say that... As long as Yaya can remain by Raishin’s side, Yaya is happy.”

“Someday I’ll make it up to you.”

“Raishin... Does that mean...”

That was a large thump in Yaya’s chest.

“You’re going to propose to Yaya...?”

“What the hell!?”

“But didn’t you say you’d listen to any request Yaya asked for?”

“I didn’t go that far! All I said was I’d make amends!”

“In that case, please make Yaya your wife!”

“Don’t ‘in that case’ me! I’m not making that sort of compromise at all!”

The covers on the bed next to him flew off.

In the midst of the darkness, he could feel the presence of a ferocious beast drawing closer.

Grabbing tightly onto his blanket, he braced himself for the ravenous beast’s attack.

Fighting back his fatigue, Raishin once again endured a sleepless night.

Finally, it was the next morning.

On the first floor of the Tortoise dormitory, there was a large dining hall, and the boarding students were gathered inside.

It was breakfast time, and a church brother was leading them in saying grace.

Vaguely going along with the words, Raishin was buttering his black toast, when he let out a huge yawn.

His lack of sleep was obvious. His eyes were glazed over and felt heavy, and there were also eyebags under them.

Next to him, Yaya was also sleepy. With a half asleep look on her face, she was slowly chipping away the shell of her egg.

Viewing the both of them suspiciously, the pretty boarding master came up to them.

“Now see here, Raishin...”

He was about to say something, but then stopped. Shaking his head,

“No, it’s nothing. I’ve been there before. At your age, if you don’t find some way to release those urges every night, it’ll end up affecting your ability to study.”

“Don’t look at me like that! I haven’t been doing the stuff you’re thinking of!”

“I’m sorry for this, boarding master. Raishin was so vigorous last night... <3”

“Don’t intentionally give people the wrong idea! The only thing that was vigorous about me last night was my resistance!”

The surrounding students burst into laughter. Feeling a migraine coming on, Raishin bit into his blackened toast. Drinking his fresh milk and chewing the thick slices of bacon, just as he added salt onto his eggs and was about to put it into his mouth,

“Hey, did you hear? The T-Rex is supposedly the one behind the clock tower’s destruction.”

Having heard that, Raishin put all his concentration into his hearing.

“This isn’t something people can just laugh and shrug off.”

“She’s essentially challenging the school’s authority, isn’t she? They’re going to pursue the maximum punishment for her.”

“Even if the headmaster forgives her, we won’t.”

The tone in their voices weren’t joking. The hostility was there, and they were giving off a dangerous presence.

“In the end, the T-Rex is a villain after all.”

“In that case, then the incident involving Felix...”

Amidst the dining hall buzzing, a strange atmosphere began to fill the area.

“I can’t believe someone like Felix would be a killer...”

“Yeah, if we’re talking about that... I think there’s something fishy about the whole affair. Didn’t they say the academy refused an offer of help from the government’s own investigation branch? If so, then everything is the headmaster’s...”

“If the T-Rex is a villain, then **Second Last** is mostly involved as well. He just transferred into the school and suddenly he’s in the Night Party. The timing is just too perfect—“

There was a loud sound of a chair scraping the floor as someone suddenly and noisily stood up.

Silence descended upon the hall in an instant. All eyes shifted onto the person who had shown no etiquette.

It was Raishin.

Yaya looked up at him, a worried expression on her face.

The group who were talking about Charl stared at Raishin in silence.

The tension in the room was so thick it could have been cut with a knife— But Raishin nonchalantly picked up his tray, brought it over to the sink and gave it a quick wash, before leaving the hall. Yaya hurriedly followed after him.

As soon as he was out of the hall, laughter could be heard within.

Yaya stared at the dining hall in irritation.

“How rude...”

“Don’t bother. If they want to laugh, let them laugh.”

He was used to being laughed at, but that wasn’t important.

From what he heard, Charl was now the enemy of the whole academy.

If he didn’t resolve the problem quickly, he would soon become powerless to do anything to help her. Even if he were to destroy the school register, she wouldn’t be able to return to the school.

“I’m taking a self-declared holiday from classes today. First we’re going to find Henri, then we’ll find Charl—“

“... Raishin? What’s the matter?”

“It’s Henri.”

“Eh?”

Raishin was staring out of the window, his gaze fixated on something.

Speak of the devil. On a small path inside a grove of trees, there was a figure of a girl hurriedly running somewhere.

Her flaxen hair and unfashionable hat stood out. There was no doubt it was Henri.

“Is she up to something again?”

From what he could see, she didn't look like she was carrying a rope to hang herself with. However, there was still the possibility that she was concealing a knife somewhere on her person. Raishin moved closer, grabbing onto the windowsill to try and get a better view of where she was going.

At that moment, Yaya suddenly cried out.

“Raishin! It's Charlotte!”

Yaya was pointing towards the tunnel of trees. The dense treetops weren't quite able to fully conceal her glittering golden hair.

That meant that Sigmund would be nearby— there he was!

Directly below Charl, his large body was hidden inside the thicket.

Charl was staring in the direction of the ruins of the clock tower. Henri was heading in the same direction.

(Is something happening...?)

Raishin jumped up onto the windowsill, extending his body out.

The tunnel of trees was blocking his vision. Even then however, he could see several figures at the ruins of the clock tower. There were all wearing suits, and they were keeping an eye on their surroundings. The sunlight's glare was being reflected off something, most likely guns.

Finally, standing beyond the armed personnel, there was a large man with a remarkable physique.

It was the headmaster. Why would he be there at this time of the day...?

“— He's conducting the investigation of the clock tower!”

He was probably there to determine the reason for its collapse and check out its current state.

In an instant, Raishin deduced Charl's plan.

(I'm such an idiot. Yesterday Professor Kimberly told me all about it, didn't she!?)

Sigmund stirred inside the thicket. As soon as he realised Sigmund was about to take flight, Raishin jumped out of the window.

“Raishin!?”

Yaya was taken aback. Without halting his run, Raishin called to her over his shoulder.

“Don't follow me! Go contact Shouko!”

“Eh— no! Yaya will come too!”

“Hurry up and go! I'm counting on you!”

Turning his head back to face the front, Raishin continued to run. Sigmund rose up from the thicket in front of him. Charl lightly jumped off the branch she was on, landing on Sigmund's back.

Rising up from the treetops, they rose into the sky. It didn't seem like they had noticed Raishin, who was running below them. Looking up, he saw Sigmund's jaw open.

(As I thought, he's going to attack!)

The clock tower ruins and the headmaster were in her line of fire.

Also, so was Henri's figure, who was running towards that place.

“Sis! Stop! Sis!”

Henri was shouting up at her. However, her voice was lost amidst the wind and the rustling of leaves.

Charl hadn't noticed Henri's presence. Sigmund was still preparing to fire. Raishin had an ominous feeling. At this rate, Henri would die as well!

Ignoring the pain in his shoulder, Raishin started to run.

(Let me make it in time!)

Bursting through the tunnel of trees in one breath, he flew onto the main street.

Henri was right in front of him. Ironically, her yelling had alerted the security guards. Finally noticing Sigmund's figure, they started to raise a fuss.

However, since it was just one shot, the Raster Cannon wasn't something that could be guarded against.

Finally, light poured forth from Sigmund's jaw.

It was an explosive torrent of light. It saturated the surroundings with its brightness, causing Raishin's field of sight to go completely white.

Raishin kicked off the ground with all of his might, reaching out for Henri's back.

In the instant his fingertips grazed her shoulders, the beam of light blew away the debris of the clock tower, making it look like the place had been licked clean. There was a roar of what sounded like an avalanche, then suddenly, the ground ceased to be.

The ground below them had crumbled, giving rise to a gaping chasm.

Without fully understanding what had just happened, Raishin plunged to the bottom of the abyss.

Chapter 3 – At the Bottom of the Abyss

(1)

Surprised by the sudden burst of light, Yaya ran to the window.

Outside, light and shadow were intertwined in various gradations of black and white.

It was the Raster Cannon. Compared to when she had seen it before, there was a remarkable difference in terms of output on this one.

The beam of light was heading towards the wreckage of the ruined clock tower at its base.

“— Raishin?!”

Unable to contain herself, Yaya jumped out of the window and started to run.

The light vanished just as it hit the ruins of the clock tower.

The security guards were raising the alarm and issuing out orders. Just as Yaya reached them, the ground suddenly gave way. The earth crumbled with a large roar. It looked like the Raster Cannon didn't just obliterate the wreckage, but pierced through the earth as well.

The debris began to fall inside the hole. Sand, rock, brick, metal— and Raishin!

“Raishin! Raishin—!”

“Wait, Yaya!”

Someone had grabbed Yaya's arm. It was a surprisingly strong grip.

The person attached to the arm was none other than the beautiful Professor Kimberly.

“It looks like you were just a step too late. But now that it has become like this, there's nothing you or I can do in this situation. Don't try anything foolish.”

“—Yaya will go search for Raishin!”

“At the bottom of the hole? Don’t bother.”

“But—!”

“Have you not noticed? There are plenty of stares in your direction.”

She looked around with a start.

Just as Kimberly had said, the security guards’ gazes were locked firmly in her direction.

They were wary, hostile, and full of fearful suspicion. Like Raishin, Yaya’s five senses were also sharper than a normal person. Their sharp stares at her were akin to holding her at gunpoint, and she felt the weight of the stares.

“You once broke through severe restraints with your own strength. That is something to be feared. At this point you are no better than a mysterious monster to them.”

Even though Kimberly had said that much, Yaya was still at a lost over what to do.

She fidgeted with a mixture of unease and impatience. Looking at her reduced to such a state, Kimberly had a rare display of gentleness in her voice.

“Follow my orders obediently. I promise I won’t do anything bad.”

“... But—“

“If you try something foolish now, then **Second Last** will get implicated as well.”

It was the coup de grace. Having heard that, Yaya stopped moving.

“In any case, consider the depth of that hole. Anyone who fell into that deep a pit should have been killed instantaneously... so even if you did go down now, there’s nothing you can do to help.”

“—!”

“However, if they’re alive, then he’ll find some way to be saved, and you going down would be a needless act.”

Her words were full of belief. It was entirely possible that Kimberly actually had more faith in Raishin than Yaya herself.

And that was something very, very shameful to realise.

“The professor... is right.”

“Good girl. Now come along.”

“Where are we going...?”

“I have an idea of my own or two. But first I’ll need to discuss it with my comrades.”

Turning her back on the commotion taking place around the large hole, Kimberly started to walk off in the direction of the grove of trees.

(2)

The sun was hanging in the night sky.

To his groggy head, that was what it appeared to be.

A black curtain had covered the entire world as far as his eye could see, and right in the centre of the blackness a large sun was shining brightly.

Raishin blinked several times, trying to jolt his fuzzy memories.

He clearly remembered he had fallen. Something about the earth giving way, and being caught up in the wake of Sigmund’s destruction.

Recalling that, he realised the light above him wasn’t the sun, but a hole that had been bored through the ground.

Which meant that he had fallen quite the distance. To find himself alive after all that was most strange.

He gingerly tried to move his fingers.

His skin turned cold at the thought he might have lost them— ah, they moved. And there was no pain too.

Raishin carefully checked himself over, before slowly rising to his feet.

His surroundings were pitch black. Light was streaming in from the hole above him, but for some strange reason it didn't seem to reach where he was.

Fortunately, he had brought his equipment with him when he left. Removing a lamp from his harness, he struck a match and lit it. Raising it up to scan his surroundings, he saw nothing but sand.

Furthermore, the walls were steeply sloped. It was like he was at the base of a massive sand hill.

“Yaya—!”

He tried calling for her, but all he could hear was the sound of his echo, albeit after some time had passed.

The space he was in was considerably big. Since when did the academy have such a large cavern underground, he wondered.

After calling out several more times, it became apparent that there was no response forthcoming from Yaya.

“No other choice then. I guess I'll have to get out of here on my own—“

At that moment, his body was paralysed with fear.

Reflexively extinguishing the lamp, he threw himself to the ground and looked up at where the presence was coming from.

Countless stars were twinkling in the sky.

No, those weren't stars— they were eyes!

He was being watched. By a large number of them!

There was incredible pressure coming off from the eyes; it felt like they were ripping off his clothes, stripping away the skin, tearing his body to pieces and seeing through each cell in his body.

All tens of thousands of them, if not hundreds.

In the next moment, they all blinked in unison—

After a few seconds had passed, he finally regained his composure. The eyes had also vanished.

His heart was beating violently. Cold sweat was pouring out from every pore in his body, leaving him soaked like he had just walked in the rain.

What the hell was that?

Was something there? Was this someone's magic art? Or was it a fear-induced hallucination?

He couldn't comprehend its true nature; neither could he even begin to imagine what it was. However, Raishin wasn't a coward that would stop just because of an unknown fear.

Lighting the lamp again, he shone the light on his surroundings.

The slope of sand extended wide and far. There was no trace of the monster left.

Raishin cleared his mind, banishing his recent experience in favour of focusing on escaping.

The slope continued downwards. Instinct alone told him to climb upwards, but it didn't look like the sand hill extended as far as the hole and climbing up sand would expend a lot of physical energy.

So the best option was to not make any false moves and calmly wait for help to arrive. However, upon inspecting his surroundings a little closer, Raishin could see rocks and debris shifting about. Most likely, they had fallen into the hole along with him when the ground gave way earlier. Plus, the ground above was most likely still fragile. If another collapse were to happen, there was a high risk that he would be crushed to death.

Discounting the fact that he was running away from the monster, the best choice he had right now was to move elsewhere.

Descending down the slope a little, the light from his lamp fell onto something strange.

“— Hey! Get a hold of yourself!”

He half ran and half slid over towards the soft object.

Bringing his ear close to her face, he checked for any signs of breathing. Thankfully there was.

“Wake up, Henri! Henriette!”

Shouting into her ear, Henri's eyes flew open with a start.

“Are you ok? Does it hurt anywhere?”

“Nooo!! A man!!”

Gripping handfuls of sand, she started throwing them at Raishin, stirring up dust clouds in the process.

If she was this lively, then most likely she was fine.

“Stop that... I said stop it, Henri!”

“I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry!”

“Quieten down. And stand up. We’re going to search for an exit.”

“Eh... an exit?”

“Did you knock your head on the way down? We fell in here together, remember?”

Pointing upwards, he gestured towards the “sun” hanging in the sky.

“The ground up there is on the verge of collapsing at any moment. If something were to fall now, we’d be crushed flatter than a biscuit on a frying pan. We can’t stay here any longer.”

“But still... is there even an exit?”

“Sure there is. If there isn’t, we’re done for. Therefore, we have to bet on there being one.”

Henri took a long and hard stare at Raishin that had some vague admiration mixed in it.

However, she still remained stubbornly obstinate and dishonest with her true feelings.

“... Please leave me here. If you’re going on, do so without me.”

Raishin chuckled wryly. Yaya was generally a pain to deal with, but Henri was also a pain to deal with, albeit in a different sense.

“Such a spoilt lady. However, even if you say no I’m going to have to bring you with me. After all, we—“

Raishin’s face turned serious.

“—will die here if we don’t act smartly.”

(3)

In front of the Tortoise dormitory, above the tunnel of trees.

Charl was straddling Sigmund's back, breathing rapid, shallow breaths.

The sound of the ruins of the clock tower cascading like a waterfall could be heard as everything plunged into the hole.

The debris, the bedrock, and also, the headmaster.

She had finally done it— Killed a person for the first time!

Her hands felt cold and unresponsive. It felt as if they were someone else's limbs entirely as Charl hugged her shoulders with her alien arms, her body trembling all over.

“Are you ok, Charl?”

She regained her senses at Sigmund's voice.

“... I'm fine. We need to hurry up and hide.”

“About that. As much as I'd love to quietly disappear— I fear it's impossible now.”

In an instant, a bullet of some sort grazed Charl's cheek.

There were pursuers in the grove!

If it were something as simple as rifles then Sigmund would be able to endure it, but the security guards were outfitted with cannons. She had to do something before they were brought down by the heavy fire.

She turned Sigmund around. As she did so, she felt the activation of magic energy.

Several shadows came bursting out of the branches.

The appearance made them look like tin soldiers adorned with helmets. They were as big as a child, inorganic mechanized dolls that were the standard issue automata given to the security guards, the Heimguarder.

With quick, agile movements like a monkey's, the automata attacked.

Sigmund beat his wings, swiped with his claws, and swung his tail to drive them away. However, there were just too many of them. For a brief moment there was an opening, and a shadow appeared behind Charl.

“Damn—“

The Heimguarder stretched out a finger. A bluish-white spark burst forth from its fingertip. The crackling light indicated it was high voltage. If Charl were to be hit by that, she would lose consciousness in an instant!

In the next moment though, the Heimguarder was blown away into the distant horizon.

In its place there was a man. His eye-catching blonde hair was closer to that of a silver colour. He was wearing a well-tailored suit but had no coat on, wearing a tight fitting vest instead. He wore a pair of tinted glasses, the expression on his face unreadable.

The man had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and now he had come to a complete halt in mid-air. Charl ignored him as she said,

“We’re retreating, Sigmund.”

“— Understood.”

There was a flash of light from Sigmund, and his large body shrank in size in an instant.

Charl lost her balance, and as she fell, the man grabbed her by the arm and pulled her up.

“Ow! Hey, try to be gentler—“

Her protests ended there. Just as she was about to violently berate him, the scenery changed in a flash.

Charl clung onto his arm with all her might so that she wouldn't fall. The man continued to accelerate, easily dodging the rain of bullets they were under.

Holding on to both Sigmund and Charl, he continued to fly through the grove smoothly.

He was like a gust of wind as he silently flew onwards, unencumbered by the weight.

Stopping just short of the field where mock battles were conducted, he cautiously changed his route, performing a U-turn.

The scenery changed before her eyes as she found herself drawing closer to the central section of the academy. As soon as the large auditorium came into sight, Charl's appearance began to transform.

Her sparkling golden hair turned into a dull brown, and her clothes changed to that of a female student's uniform.

It was most likely someone's magic art. By the time Charl had transformed into the inconspicuous female student—Ravena—the man had landed behind the building.

He gently set Charl down. He was more of a gentleman than she had thought. Sigmund had transformed into a dove, and was now perched on her shoulder, cooing.

The two of them entered into the auditorium, heading to the third floor where the executive committee's private area was.

At the extreme end of the third floor, in the old-fashioned chairman's office, the young boy from earlier was present.

“Welcome back, Ravena.”

Charl didn't answer, her face pale as she tried to hold back her nausea.

“Oh dear, what's the matter? Does impersonating a dead person give you the creeps?”

He spoke in a light tone. Or rather, it would be more accurate to say he was teasing her.

“She was your roommate, wasn't she? The good-natured Ravena.”

He was right. Ravena was a good natured person. She had also been nice towards Charl.

If Charl hadn't gone and done that, they might even have ended up as friends.

Seeing Charl's silence, the young boy shrugged his shoulders, a gestured laced with ennui.

“Let's get to the main point then. With the destruction of the ruins of the clock tower, the headmaster's status is currently unknown.”

His voice suddenly changed, turning icy cold.

“I told you that there was a large cavern beneath the academy grounds— there was a reason why I said as much. You still haven't strengthened your resolve, have you?”

“I have! I already killed the headmaster properly, didn't I!?”

“So he gets buried under all that rubble... why did you do it in such a roundabout way? Considering your Sigmund, you could have easily blown past his security detail if you wanted to.”

“... That would have been a terrible plan. Since yesterday, the headmaster has been escorted by an anti-magic arts detail.”

“Right, since yesterday. However, I don't believe that his anti-magic arts detail would have been effective against your Gram circuit.”

Charl fell quiet. As vexing as it was, his logic was perfectly sound.

“Well, it’s fine. I have no issues as long as you deliver what you promised before the deadline. Which ends in about... twenty hours?”

“... What are you going on about? I finished the job.”

“Nope, you didn’t. Thanks to that though, she managed to survive as well.”

The boy reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a crystal, holding it up for her to see.

Some kind of scenery surfaced in the depths of the clear, transparent crystal.

This was a magic device then. A tool that had a magic circuit installed in so that it could be used in magic arts.

Magic devices did not possess intelligence like automata, so the mage had to channel and control the magic energy on his or her own. If compared to a musical instrument, automata were like instruments which came with instrumentalists attached, while magic devices were just simple instruments—the sound they produced came from the one playing them.

Seeing the image reflected in the crystal, Charl leapt to her feet.

That was Henri’s figure lying prone on the ground!

“Where is she!? Where is that!?”

“Calm down. Henri’s still alive. Or rather, I should say you didn’t end up killing her.”

It was a loaded statement. It took a while for Charl to realise what he was insinuating.

“That’s right, you should have killed her! She was in the line of fire as well. Isn’t it great that you ended up not aiming at the chairman after all?”

Charl suppressed her emotions, speaking through trembling lips.

“... Where is that place?”

“The large cave underground. After you destroyed the bedrock, everything collapsed down below. The Chairman, his security detail, and also, your cute little sister.”

The boy returned his gaze to the crystal, letting out a cry of surprise.

“Well, this is interesting. It seems somehow, **Second Last** is down there as well.”

Charl gritted her teeth. Raishin was next to Henri, even though she had told him to stay away. He really knew how to get on her nerves, ignoring her warning to him like that.

However— somewhere inside her heart she felt like she could understand the part of him that refused to give up.

“Shin, if I may interject here?”

His attendant called out to him. The man with the tinted glasses gave a butler like bow as he spoke.

“I fear it’s going to be extremely difficult, considering the security guards will have their eyes on the site. However, if the young master were to issue out an order, then retrieval will be easy.”

“I see. In that case, let’s do that. Bring ten men with you. I’d like to know the situation on the ground as well.”

Charl walked up towards the boy, slamming both her hands on his desk.

“I’m going too! Henri—“

“You can’t.”

“Let me go along! If anything were to happen to Henri, I—“

“I just said you can’t.”

Charl glared at the boy, her eyes full of killing intent.

In response the Charl’s magic energy, Sigmund spread his wings, albeit dove ones.

However, she couldn’t do anything.

“Instead of heading underground, you should be heading towards the school buildings. Classes are about to start after all, Miss Ravena.”

Charl looked like she had plunged to the bottom of the abyss of despair as she helplessly trudged out of the room.

Once she had left, the young boy gave a small laugh as he looked up at his attendant.

“You look like you have something you want to say, Shin.”

“... The one who told Henriette where to go was you. If the Raster Cannon had been a direct hit, we would have lost our hostage. Why then, did you do something like that?”

“Because it seemed like a fun idea.”

Shin fell quiet. The boy drank his black tea, giving him a sulky expression.

“Don’t make that face. I knew Charlotte was incapable of attacking in any other way but that. There was no worry that Henriette would have perished.”

“But things that happen underground are beyond your control. In the worst case scenario, she could have fallen to her death.”

“If that happened all we need to do is to create a new Henriette, no?”

“... That’s heretical through and through. You’re becoming completely rotten to the core, aren’t you?”

“Thank you for the compliment. I’ll take you to task later.”

“... Just what are you thinking anyway?”

“You don’t get it? If the Cathedral of Fools really does exist, it will help boost the academy’s research by a considerable amount. There is value in exposing its existence, even if it comes at the considerable risk of exposing our own plans. And now, it really has appeared.”

A carefree laugh escaped his lips. It was a giggle that sounded like it came from an angel.

Shin stared at his master’s laughing face with a mixture of dread and awe, which turned into intoxication.

“I need to ascertain this with my own eyes; how close this academy is to God’s Simulacrum. It looks like there might be an unexpected bonus down below, so no playing around when you get there, ok?”

“As you wish.”

Shin gave a bow, immediately exiting the room thereafter.

(4)

“D-did you just say we’ll die...?”

Henri glanced over at Raishin, fear flashing across her eyes.

“It’s just a possibility, mind you. Think about it. No one’s ever been told that such a large cavern like this exists underground. So it’s most likely a secret. And obviously, you could probably count the number of people who do know on one hand.”

“... It’s fine. I’m ok with that. If we were to die here, it will save a lot of hassle.”

“Stop being unreasonable. You’re exactly as hard-headed as she is.”

Henri's shoulder twitched at that. Growing even more stubborn, she turned her back on Raishin.

Hugging her knees, she made herself smaller and ceased all movement, not moving even a single muscle.

"In any case, help will come. I will definitely not die."

"You have quite the nerve to say you want to die. If help doesn't come, what will you do?"

"Perfect. If help doesn't come, then I will die here."

At that moment, a large chunk of debris collapsed with perfecting timing. The impact sent vibrations through the ground and scattered sand from the slope all around.

Passing not even five metres from Henri, the debris disappeared down into the darkness.

If she had been hit directly by it, she would have died for sure. Even if she had been grazed by it, the result would surely have been the same.

Taking a closer look, he could see Henri's face had turned pale, and she was trembling slightly.

Raishin continued to observe her, all the while formulating a plan in his head. Eventually, he opened his mouth to speak.

"I just remembered something. A long time ago, there were several thousand people buried alive in this cave."

"Eh...?"

"This site is a large facility for magic arts. This cave itself is a colossal magic device. In order to protect this secret, the workers who worked on this were buried alive upon completion to seal their lips. Incidentally..."

“...?”

“The people left down here resorted to cannibalism to survive. They tore apart each other’s flesh, pulled out intestines, drank the blood and crunched the bones.”

Henri grabbed on to her knees even tighter as unnatural strength flowed through her fingers.

“Because they threw away their humanity, eventually the world rejected them—they became monsters. Eventually, after a long period of time, there was only one monster left...”

“... W-what happened then?”

“Even now, he still roams this labyrinth. Searching for his next prey...”

The fire in Raishin’s lamp flickered unsteadily. Because of his earlier story, even Raishin himself got goosebumps and felt the hair on his neck stand on end.

“Tha... that’s just a clichéd horror story. You made it up.”

“Oh really? Then you should try to strain your ears a little. If you listen carefully enough, you can hear the sound of the monster crawling about. There, from down below—“

Abruptly cutting his sentence short, Raishin whipped around faster than a bullet.

“... W-what’s wrong?”

“Shh... Can’t you hear something?”

Henri gulped, drawing her thighs close as she shrank her body even further.

“There... it’s faint, but...”

“Eh... wai—... I don’t like this... Stop that....”

“HEEEEEEEELLLLLP MEEEEEEEE!!!!”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Henri screamed, covering her head with her hands.

“I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry—“

Henri was crying in a half-crazed state. Raishin was surprised by how effective his plan had been, succeeding far beyond his expectation.

“... No, I mean, I’m sorry. That was a joke. You don’t have to be that scared.”

“A... j-joke...?”

“It’s just an altered version of an old horror story told in my hometown. I’m just a transfer student with bad grades. Because of that, I didn’t know this place existed. Or rather, I couldn’t have known about a place like this.”

“T-that’s so cruel! It’s inexcusable! I thought I was going to piss myself!”

“A young lady from a noble household shouldn’t say something like ‘piss’.”

As he thought, Henri was scared of death. She wanted to push pain and fear far away.

In that case, perhaps it was possible for him to get her to open up about why she was so intent on committing suicide.

In this world, there were people who were denied the chance at life even if they wanted to live on—

But he didn’t intent to preach to her along those lines.

Raishin himself had harboured thoughts of following after his family immediately after losing them. Living on was tough, all he wanted to do was to give up on everything and just end it all. Once someone had steeled themselves to that extent, no amount of preaching would be able to undermine their resolve. The person that had changed Raishin’s mind— given him a renewed purpose for

living was his brother, who ironically was the same person who gave him the idea of entertaining suicide.

Revenge had become the reason for Raishin to go on living.

Therefore, in place of preaching to her, Raishin decided to take the soft approach.

“I don’t know what will happen once you pass into the next world, neither am I even sure that there’s a next world. But if there is, it’s probably as dark as it is in here, gloomy, and full of dead people.”

“Uu...”

“Someone as scared of ghosts as you are shouldn’t pass on to the next world by your own volition.”

“I... Even I.... am scared... of dying...”

As he thought, Henri wasn’t someone who ‘wanted to die’.

So there should be another reason for her continued attempts at suicide; maybe it was more like she had to die...?

“In any case, don’t fret. I’m here with you now. Even if it’s just me, at the very least you’re not alone anymore. We’ll look for the exit together, and I promise I won’t let you die so easily.”

Henri uneasily raised her head.

For an instant, the look on her face triggered the image of his sister’s face inside Raishin’s memories.

“My partner is the extremely jealous type. Once she finds out I’m in all alone in here with another woman by ourselves, she’ll move heaven and earth to chase us down. That’s why it’s going to be fine. Help will definitely arrive.”

Henri looked downwards, before finally nodding her head.

It was finally the first honest gesture she had made since Raishin first met her.

“Alright then. Let’s go.”

He extended his hand to pull her up.

Henri hesitated. However, while she was fearful of men, it looked like the fear of her current predicament won out. Gingerly extending her hand, like she was stretching it out towards a mad dog, she grabbed onto Raishin’s.

(5)

The ground where the ruins of the clock tower once stood was completely clean.

The rubble, which had been piled up, had disappeared completely.

In its place there was a bowled shaped cavity. It looked exactly like one of the craters on the moon.

She’d heard a large hole had opened up, but from her angle it was hard to tell. Frey stood on tiptoe and leant backwards as far as she possibly could, before losing her balance and tumbling over.

The surrounding area had been sealed off with a rope, restricting access to the common student.

Security personnel stood in a line holding their guns, their automata also brought out. As if that wasn’t enough, the disciplinary committee members had been ordered onto the scene. The security was awfully heavy, and everyone was flurried.

“Hey, did you manage to confirm the number of victims? How many people were caught in this?”

“No idea. How’s the headmaster? Is he dead or alive?”

“Is it true that there were students who were caught in the blast?”

“I saw that. It was an oriental boy, and I think I saw a girl fall in as well.”

—An oriental?

Frey turned pale, hurriedly rushing towards the rope.

However, the people there obviously didn't let her pass. A female student stood in her way. The armband around her arm had the words Censor on it. She was a disciplinary committee member.

“You can't go any further. There's a risk the ground might experience a second collapse.”

“Erm... Just for a little bit...”

“No means no.”

“...” Sob.

“I'm not letting you pass, even if you cry. This is something the board of directors decided on. There's no two ways about it.”

Lightly shooing her away, Frey had no choice but to trudge back.

In front of her though, there was someone in sandals who was blocking the way.

Looking up, she saw the person had the same pearl coloured hair as her, as well as her red eyes.

“This smells fishy.”

Her younger brother, Loki, was standing there with the aid of a crutch. Considering he was still an inpatient and his tendon still gave him trouble, it must have taken him quite the effort to make it all the way out here.

An unhappy look crossed his face, before he scornfully spoke.

“No sooner does he get discharged then he runs into trouble. He must have been born under a cursed star. Don’t get involved with him, or his misfortune will spread and devour you.”

Having callously passed down his opinion, he turned his back on the ruins of the clock tower. Watching him walk away with unsteady steps, Frey wondered why he had even bothered to come all the way down here, and thought it very strange.

“Raishin...”

Obviously, there was no one to reply her.

At the same time, there were a bunch of people gathered amongst the trees which were a little ways off from the clock tower.

Hiding themselves behind the trees, they were covertly observing the remains of the clock tower.

All of them were clad in black mantles. The hood and hem were inlaid with gold thread, making the garment look gorgeous. As far as the eye could see, there were four shadows. All four of them were giving off no presence whatsoever, making them impossible to detect. There was no figure of any automata nearby, but there was no doubt that they were all superb mages.

Looking at them, Yaya recoiled slightly. If automata had such a thing as instinct, then Yaya was feeling an instinctive fear right now.

Next to her, Kimberly was leaning against a tree. Although she was wearing her usual white coat, there was no mistaking that Kimberly was definitely one of them.

“Man oh man, that little punk tomboy went and did something enjoyable. To think she’d actually destroy a cultural monument with a hundred years of history engraved into it. Plus she even wiped out the remains.”

There was a sarcastic laugh. Above her head, a man who was perched on a branch had silently opened his mouth.

“Now then, what are you going to do, comrade Nightingale— or should I say, Professor Kimberly?”

“I’m in the middle of thinking about it right now, comrade Turtledove.”

Behind the two of them, the three other shadows spoke up.

“The enemy’s objective is clear. We should move to protect the headmaster at once.”

“I agree with Crow. Right now, we cannot afford to have the headmaster die on us. Also, it will be a good chance for us to ascertain the Cathedral of Fools with our own eyes.”

“... I have no objections to Crow’s suggestion either.”

“Please wait. If we make any rash moves, we risk causing the Cathedral to vanish, and that will be a problem.”

Kimberly sharply interjected, blocking off the three who were inclined to take action.

“Our goal is simply observation and surveillance— We prevent the leak of information over that, but we cannot stop progress itself. If we were to act now, there’s a chance we’ll end up altering fate itself.”

The three fell into silence. Kimberly’s objections were quite well founded.

The man called Turtledove spoke up again, as if he was representing them.

“Nightingale. You mentioned **Second Last** has also disappeared?”

“Yes, he must have been born under a heck of an unlucky star. He’s an illiterate student of mine, but can be quick witted and oddly discerning at times. Without fail he’ll always be in the middle of any commotion going on.”

“The sole survivor of the Akabane clan... Could it be he’s the one that Father was talking about...”

“The possibility exists. Although he seems a little lacking, if he’s really the one.”

“I understand. Although I cannot deny this course of action is lax, but we should respect Father’s instructions. In all likelihood we will receive the order to continue our silent observation.”

He looked around. The other members nodded in assent.

“Nightingale. What will you do?”

“Someone needs to stick around to observe, right? If anything happens inside the academy, I’ll report it as soon it occurs.”

With that, their plan was settled. The shadows disappeared one after another. Silently they vanished, as if they were ghosts.

In the end Yaya didn’t manage to get a word in, she could only watch as their discussion progressed.

Once only Kimberly was left, she relaxed and let out a sigh of relief.

“I’m worried about them, but let’s get out of here first. Are you ok, Yaya?”

“Y-yes. Excuse me, but what are you going to do about Raishin?”

“Let’s leave him for now. However, I don’t want you to think I’m being cold-hearted here. Once he returns back to the surface, we’ll move to ensure his safety. We’re not going to let him die so easily.”

While walking, Kimberly turned around only once.

“If he really is the boy that Father foresaw, then surely he won’t kick the bucket in a place like this... Now then.”

Kimberly grinned like a cat. Yaya didn’t understand what she was talking about, her head tilted slightly in puzzlement.

(6)

Relying on the lamp, Raishin and Henri descended down the slope.

The area illuminated by the light didn't extend very far. Having to go down sand made the descent difficult. Even so, after taking half an hour to walk down the slope, they finally made it to level ground.

The surface beneath their feet was hard. They were walking on rock.

“Hopefully from here on it'll be level ground. Still, can't see a thing in front of me—“

While taking several steps forward, suddenly Henri's figure sank downwards. She was falling!

Raishin's reaction was lightning fast. With his left arm he grabbed onto Henri's wrist, putting all his strength and effort into one explosive pull. The momentum generated caused the both of them to fall backwards onto the sandy ground.

The light from the lamp shone clearly on where Henri had been, illuminating a sheer cliff where she had almost plunged over.

He couldn't see the bottom, which meant that it was very deep. The debris that had fallen down the slope earlier had probably plunged down this chasm. It struck him completely that if they were to fall here, it would definitely be the end of the road.

For the briefest of instants, he thought he saw something white near the foot of the cliff— a dome shaped object.

A castle... or a cathedral?

No, he must have been mistaken. There was no way light could reach that far a distance, so maybe his eyes were playing tricks on him.

Remembering the multitude of eyes from earlier, Raishin shivered involuntarily.

Shaking his head, he stood up and extended his hand to Henri, who was still slumped over in a heap.

“Are you ok? Here, grab my hand—“

“Nooo! Don’t touch me!”

A punch flew over in his direction, and Raishin quickly dodged it.

“That’s quite the thanks for someone trying to help you. Why do you hate men so much... Oh, I see. It’s because of that, isn’t it? In the past, some guy unceremoniously dumped you like yesterday’s trash...”

“N-no! I swear upon the honour of the Belew name, nothing like that ever happened— wait, that scenario is very rude! How can you violate me even in your wild imagination!?”

“Like hell I did! Stop treating me like I’m some kind of pervert!”

Henri pulled down her cap and hid her face inside it, like she always did.

“I... hate boys. They’re scary, violent, stupid, dirty, and also...”

“Even with Raishin’s exceptional hearing, he couldn’t catch the last bit of her sentence.

Still, the fact that he managed to have an actual conversation was a huge step forward.

Raishin chuckled wryly, and extended his hand slowly this time towards her.

“Let’s go. This time, watch your feet a little better.”

“O-ok— Ow!”

She tried to stand, but couldn’t. She must have twisted some part of her leg awkwardly when she had fallen earlier. Raishin reached for her shin, using his fingertips to press certain points.

“Kya! That hurts!”

“Sorry. But at least it’s not broken.”

“How do you know that for sure?”

“I know jujitsu. Jujitsu specialises in bruises and broken bones.”

“Ju-jitsu?”

“It’s a grappling art founded in Japan. That aside, if your leg really was broken you’d be crying in pain by now, and the pain you’d experience would be severely intense.”

Henri wasn’t that heavy. He figured he could carry her on his back, but—

Henri hated men. She’d probably be in great anguish over having to ride piggy-back on Raishin. Furthermore Raishin wasn’t at full strength. If he did carry her, travelling long distances would be a problem.

“Well, it can’t be helped I guess. We’ll have to wait for help here.”

Forcibly using his shoulder to support Henri, who looked unhappy about it, they moved a little along the cliff. Moving a safe distance away from any more potential falls, they sat down on rocky ground.

“I ate breakfast before I came here— but what about you?”

“... It couldn’t be helped. I didn’t get the chance to.”

“Here.”

Raishin proffered a packet of sorts. It was wrapped tightly with paraffin paper. Henri took and unwrapped it, revealing a hard breadstick.

It was covered in sugar. Rather than calling it a breadstick, it would be more accurate to say it was more like a doughnut.

“It’s a little smashed up, but still edible. Go on, eat.”

“... Do you always carry something like this with you when you go out?”

“It’s been a lifesaver on more than one occasion. I also carry water with me.”

Henri stared at the hard bread for a while, before taking a bite.

It was crude, portable food. He didn’t think it would suit her refined tastes, but—

“This is delicious...”

Unexpectedly, she muttered that while keeping her face down, hiding her expression from him.

It was the same as when Charl turned her head away. They both were embarrassed to let others see the expressions on their faces.

After finishing the bread and water, Henri hugged her knees, her words coming out in bits and pieces.

“... I’m sorry. This is entirely my fault.”

“What’s with that? Did you eat something bad?”

“If I ate anything bad, you’re the one who gave it to me in the first place!”

She regained some vigour during her outburst, but it was gone as soon as it had appeared, and she was back to being gloomy.

“You know, you’re really Charl’s little sister. You have the same face as she does when you both get angry.”

“... You want to say something along the lines of my sister is prettier than me, just like the rest of them, don’t you?”

Henri suddenly gave an empty, derisive laugh as she turned her head away.

“After all, all the boys are always... saying my sister is...”

As soon as he heard those whispered words, an indescribable feeling began to spread inside Raishin's chest.

He had dismissed the feeling as nothing at first, but now his convictions over it had changed.

The sheer ridiculousness of it started to build up inside him, tickling his sides, until Raishin finally burst out laughing.

“Wh- How rude! How can you laugh... How dare you laugh... You!”

“Don't throw sand at me! I'm not laughing at you or anything!”

With tears in her eyes, Henri stared at Raishin, a mixture of trust and suspicion mixed on her face.

“I also have a single older brother, whose extraordinary talent is best described as out of this world.”

“__”

“He's someone who's been heralded as possessing more talent than our very first ancestor of the clan. If God really exists, then he was extremely loved by God. Someone as ordinary as me could never hope to reach him. My father used to say this: If I was the firstborn son and my elder brother the second, then it would have caused a lot of problems with the succession of the clan.”

Henri stared at Raishin like she was staring at something fascinating.

“The adults always compared the both of us. The reality was that he and I were as different as heaven and earth. Unfortunately, I was the lowly earth.”

How would she take Raishin's unprompted outburst?

After a while, Henri began to speak in bits and pieces again.

“When we were children... Sis... she was very popular.”

“Popular... Huh, looking at her now, I seriously cannot imagine that ever happening before.”

“Everyone always gathered around her.”

“Sure, but nowadays they surround her at a distance.”

“She was always very kind and gentle to everyone.”

“She’s always so crabby to everyone.”

Raishin interrupted her every statement, even though she had finally continued to talk on. Somehow or rather, there was an extreme gap between the Charl in Henri’s memory and the Charl of today. Perhaps her character had been moulded by her recent circumstances? Raishin entertained the possibility.

At that moment, there was a faint rustle of cloth.

It was just several metres away. Someone was extremely close to them!

“Answer my question concisely, please.”

A clear killing intent filled the metallic sounding voice that was asking the question— at his ear.

An instant later, there was the sound of something landing. Raishin realised that it was the sound of him landing after he had jumped back.

Someone had sneaked up behind him and landed quietly behind. This someone was faster than whatever Raishin could do.

Even with my reactions, I couldn’t do anything!?

“Are you my master’s enemy?”

Without answering, Raishin slowly turned around.

The mystery person didn't seem to find this action hostile. Thanks to that, Raishin was able to get a look at that person's face.

It was a girl. She was wearing a headdress that was packed with many frills. There were tiny ribbons tied into her hair, which even in the darkness Raishin could tell was a vivid pink. She had thin eyebrows and a small nose. Her facial features were modest and graceful, but had this gentle brilliance about it that made the whole look very adorable.

It was a face he could and would never forget—

“Nadeshiko...!”

It was the face of his dead sister.

Chapter 4 – What should have been Hidden is Brought to Light

(1)

The crimson flames danced as the black smoke coiled around like a massive snake.

Standing amidst his family's corpses and broken puppets,

“Ten... Did you do this?”

There was a slight quiver in Raishin's voice as he faced his brother's back.

“Did you... kill our father..?”

Tenzen didn't turn to face him, but continued to look down upon their sister's dead body and answered curtly.

“Yes.”

“And mother...?”

“I did it.”

“Why would—“

“They were hindering me.”

“And Na-Nadeshiko...?”

“I dissected her.”

“Why... Why would you...!?”

“It was necessary.”

He felt his head burning up.

Anger and grief. The two emotions were raging wildly inside him, churning inside and overtaking him like a ship lost in a storm.

On the other hand, perhaps this was a nightmare. He was screaming inside his head for all of this to not be real.

Still unclear over what was really happening, Raishin continued to holler out question after question.

“Why... What do you mean it was necessary!? Why would do that to Nadeshiko...!?”

He breathed in and spat out. His elder brother though, was completely devoid of emotion as he answered.

“To create god.”

The empty and vacant answer resounded inside Raishin’s heart.

To create god—

What was that?

What the hell was that...!?

Who was this person? This isn't the brother I know.

I don't get it. Nothing is making sense. I don't understand, I don't—!

His world was slowly tearing apart, and his vision was growing blur. Just as his heart sounded like it was about to rupture,

“Rai... shin...”

Within the harsh roar of the surging flames, there was a small groan.

Raishin came back to his sense, turning around.

“Father!”

Even now with his head split open, his father was still drawing breath, calling out to him.

Raishin ran over to his father without thinking, who was making gestures with his hands.

At his brother's feet, what he had thought were remains of an automaton suddenly sprang to life, swinging a sword.

As his brother dodged, the puppet used the opening to fling the sword away and charge towards Raishin.

It was a female automaton that resembled his mother. The automaton took Raishin into an embrace, flying up into the sky.

“You must... live on!”

Was that something his father had really said, or did he hallucinate those words?

Holding on with a strength that a half-naked Raishin couldn't struggle out of, the automaton brought Raishin outside of the estate.

Just as it set him down in the garden, it suddenly crumpled onto the ground like the string holding it up had been cut, where it crumbled to pieces.

With a whoosh, the flames shot up even higher as it completely consumed the estate.

As the fires burned on, Raishin wailed in despair in front of his house, which was falling apart in front of his eyes.

For the first time in his life, Raishin cursed his elder brother—

And cursed his own helplessness.

(2)

“Nadeshiko...!”

A shocked Raishin fixed his eyes upon the maiden standing behind him.

She looked the same as she did back then. Her appearance was exactly the same as Raishin’s memories.

However, that couldn’t be. Nadeshiko was dead. Raishin had personally gathered up her ashes himself. Those ashes were now with him.

That’s why even though this maiden had Nadeshiko’s face, she wasn’t Nadeshiko.

He could feel his blood boiling throughout his entire body. At the same time though, his heart was frozen solid.

“... Fancy meeting you at a place like this.”

His voiced brimming with anger, Raishin called out into the darkness opposite him.

“This must be some sort of fate, Magnus.”

Without making a sound, a figure glided out from the darkness.

His silver mask covering his face, he was clad in his usual coat.

His self-confidence was overflowing— No, that wasn't it.

For the strongest living organisms above ground, even if they didn't have self-confidence, they still wouldn't fear anything else. This was a concept surpassing something as simple as confidence, where they realised and accepted the fact that they were the strongest.

Transcendence would be a good way to put it. This man had transcended strength itself.

Raishin honed his senses, searching for the presence of automata.

... There wasn't any. He couldn't lower his guard, but at the very least, it looked like the only puppet that was following him was the lone maiden.

Magnus didn't say anything. Was he... watching Raishin sizing up the situation?

(... Should I do it?)

He tensed his legs up. The distance between them was only several metres. If he were to resort to using the doll next to him, Raishin could kick him before he even had time to focus his magic energy.

Tension started to build up. The atmosphere grew strained, and just as it was thick enough to be cut with a knife,

“Oh my, was there someone else down here as well?”

A voice feigning ignorance suddenly cut in.

The voice belonged to a man in the prime of his life. He was splendidly well-built, and Raishin would have no trouble believing it if someone told him this man was from the army.

His face was tanned, he had a moustache, and there were crinkles in the outer corners of his eyes. He could have been called a good natured old man, but he was still a little too young for that label, and he was overflowing with vitality. Still, his smiling face did leave the impression that he was a good natured old man.

This man appeared from behind Magnus, smiling genially at Raishin.

“You’re Raishin Akabane, are you not?”

“... I’m honoured that the headmaster would remember a lowly student such as myself.”

“Of course I’d remember you. You are a puppeteer that holds promise for the future after all.”

He grinned at Raishin. It was a defenceless smile, but Raishin still shivered.

(This guy is also a monster...!)

When he had received his gauntlet during the ceremony he had come face to face with the headmaster. However, the headmaster then and now were like two different people. Now that they were in a place with little people around, there was nothing to obstruct the headmaster’s intensity of power.

Coming into direct contact, Raishin could feel the intimidatingly huge well of magic energy. On top of that, he had trained his muscles well. If Raishin were to start a scuffle directly in front of him, there was no telling what could happen to him.

While giving off a fearsome presence and overflowing strength, the headmaster continued to smile at Raishin,

“What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Narrowing his eyes sharply, his gaze at Raishin was as sharp as any blade.

“Did you perhaps, see something weird?”

“... No, not particularly.”

“That’s good then. Magnus here is acting as my bodyguard. I must apologise if he startled you.”

“Bodyguard...?”

“You must have gotten caught up with the earlier collapse. Hm, and the young lady over there—“

Recognising Henri, he smacked his fist into his palm.

“Ah, you must be the other Belew daughter.”

“—! Ah yes... My name is Henriette.”

Henri twitched at the headmaster, but she still remembered etiquette as she bowed politely at him.

“So you’re Charlotte’s sister. The Count was an exceptional puppeteer.”

“Eh... You knew my father?”

“Of course. However, that is a topic best left for another time.”

The headmaster brought that topic to a close, and cheerfully began another one.

“As fellow survivors caught in the collapse, we should band together and wait for help. Don’t worry, I’m sure my diligent secretary has already made arrangements for our rescue.

Once again, the look in his eye turned as sharp as a hawk.

“So I ask you refrain from doing as you please. Is that ok, Raishin?”

I will not tolerate a fight, was what he was saying. The aura he was giving off meant that it was the final say.

Having finished talking, he sat down.

Next to him sat Magnus, and beside him, his automaton.

Completing the circle was Raishin and Henriette, who were seated opposite them, a little distance away from the fire.

The headmaster began to discuss high level magic arts with Magnus. Raishin felt grateful that they were being left alone. He observed Magnus intently, like he was waiting for an opening to assassinate him.

Abruptly, the automaton lifted her head up and muttered.

“I apologise for interrupting, Master. Should I go and seek aid?”

“... No. You’re forbidden to leave the headmaster’s side.”

“In that case, what if I smash through the ceiling?”

Raishin did a double take. She had just said something unbelievably dangerous.

The headmaster hurriedly opened his mouth to interject.

“Wait. You mustn’t do that. Magnus, surely you understand. Any form of direct hit would be dangerous, since we have no idea what could drop down on us or where it’d fall.”

“You need not worry. I will smash every last rock, big or small, till they are nothing but powder—“

Magnus held up his hand, and his automaton fell silent.

“Don’t do something so needless. You need only protect the headmaster.”

“Yes, Master. As you wish.”

She despondently hung her head downwards. Her side profile looked all too familiar to Raishin, so much so that a light voice began to replay inside his head.

Brother. Brother. Brother—

(Goddammit... There has to be something I can do!)

A different kind of irritation than when he was worried about Charl's welfare ignited inside his chest.

He was right there in front of Raishin, and there was nothing he could do!

Two weeks had passed since the start of the Night Party. Tonight was the 86th seat's turn to take the stage. If he counted the 87th seat who didn't appear yesterday, he would have to fight through eighty six more people to get to Magnus.

Of course, that would mean going through Frey, Loki, and Charl.

It was such a long way off— but now he was literally next to him. So close, and yet so far.

Then again, could he reach Magnus's level just by beating eighty odd people in combat?

Raishin had trained under Shouko for that very purpose, but if the day actually came, his current strength was nowhere near Magnus at all. If they were to meet, it would be the same as his current situation. Magnus would be right there in front of him where he would be able to reach him, but not possess the strength to defeat him at all!

“... Raishin?”

Henri's voice brought him back to his senses. It looked like he had been unconsciously releasing magic energy.

“Sorry. It looks like I got a little worked up.”

“... What's the matter? Ever since just now, you've been acting weird.”

Using the crackling of the fire to conceal his voice, he spoke to Henri such that only she could hear him.

“I’ve sworn vengeance on that guy for my clan... and my sister.”

Henri was surprised. Her eyes widening, she glanced back and forth between Magnus and Raishin.

Having been told this so suddenly, there was no way she could appreciate the gravity of the situation. She was more surprised by what Raishin had said rather than the severity of the situation itself. Raishin himself was surprised at what he had said. He hadn’t planned on telling anyone else...

But the words kept on coming one after another.

“I came to this academy to kill him. He’s revered as the Squadron leading Marshal— but now he’s only brought along one puppet instead of the full ensemble.”

Henri gulped.

“... Are you... Are you going to do it now?”

“As much as it pains me to say it, no. This might be a one in a thousand lifetimes’ chance, but my partner isn’t here by my side. Or do you expect me to take him on by myself?”

“Why... aren’t you doing that?”

“Huh?”

“If you really felt that strongly, you... you should have already done something by now.”

This little girl had seen right through him. Raishin gave a snort of self-depreciation, stretching out his legs.

“I won’t fight battles I can’t win. If I lost and died, I wouldn’t be able to show my face to my sister. Besides, you’re here. I won’t try anything stupid until I’ve at least escorted you back onto solid ground.”

“I’m... not worth it. There is no value in protecting me... You should leave me be and just do what you really want to do.”

“Worth it?”

“I’m... fine with anything. I’m just a worthless girl from the garbage heap. I have no magic energy, I’m not pretty, I’m a coward... and I’m w-weak.”

“Are you comparing yourself to Charl when you think that?”

Bingo. Henri clamped her mouth shut and nodded so hard her chin knocked into her chest.

Raishin couldn’t help letting out a small laugh as he warned Henri.

“Don’t tell anyone else about my revenge. Not even Charl knows about it after all.”

“Eh... Not even sis? Then why would you tell something so important to someone like... me?”

“I don’t think of you as a stranger.”

For some reason, those words seemed to resonate within Henri’s heart.

Henri suddenly lifted her head up, turning towards Raishin.

“... Um. The truth is, I’m not actually a student here.”

“Huh? What do you mean you’re not a student?”

“This isn’t a school where someone like me could ever hope to qualify for... I’m just a messenger despatched to—“

Suddenly, Raishin felt a strong killing intent on the back of his neck.

The darkness behind him was wavering. A sudden gust of wind blew from behind him, causing his hair to stand on end.

The next instant, a heavy blow landed squarely on his neck.

(3)

The wall was excessively white, making it plain and devoid of feeling.

This was the ward used for patients admitted to the doctor's office.

Loki was seated on his bed, a difficult expression on his face as he was poring through a research journal on biology.

By his side, there was a large sword leaning against the wall— His automaton, Cherubim, was resting. The two lights that indicated its eyes were fixed upon its master, who was studying intently.

Suddenly, there was the click of someone's shoes in the hallway outside as he noticed a presence drawing nearer.

Abruptly, Kimberly poked her face into the room.

“You look pretty lonely without **Second Last** around, you know?”

“Who is!”

Loki yelled, but then realised overreacting to her joke would be his loss, so he calmed his tone of voice down.

“Now that the noisy one is gone, this ward has become a refreshing place to be in, Professor Kimberly.”

“Then I guess you'd prefer the status quo remain the way it is.”

“What do you want with me? I don't think you'd come all the way here just to banter with me... right?”

“That would actually be quite fun too. But I'm here because there's something I need to discuss with you.”

“... I’m tired of your ‘discussions’. It’s just a nice way of saying you’re about to try and pull off some sort of deception.”

“That’s exactly right. Under the pretext of having a discussion, my ulterior motive here is to have you pay back that favour you owe me.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Well, it’s something simple, really. You just have to protect a certain individual.”

“Protect? I’m just an academy student...”

“Obviously, I know that already.”

Her words were laced with mystery. Loki shrugged his shoulders, casually sighing.

“Hmph... It looks like I don’t have the right to refuse.”

“Don’t sulk. I am a nice and gentle teacher after all. If you perform your task well enough, I’ll compensate you for your efforts.”

“I’m not in want for money.”

“It’s not money. It’s something you want so desperately that you’d beg me for it with your own will. To be more precise, it’s something the both of you would want.”

Kimberly took out a book, showing off the title to him.

It was esoteric writings about magic arts. Seeing the title, Loki’s eyes widened in surprise.

“*The Organum*—!”

The contents of the book dealt with the internal organs. This was clearly a forbidden tome!

His excitement rising, Loki could feel his own heart beating faster. He took a few deep breaths to steady himself.

“That’s a joke in bad taste, Professor. That book was under the strict supervision of Nectar...”

Halfway through his sentence, he suddenly realised it.

The Organum wasn’t a lost tome.

Just because it was under strict supervision didn’t mean it was something that he couldn’t gain access to.

“Don’t jump to the wrong conclusion. There’s no way I could ever give something like this to you.”

Kimberly grinned, a man-eating smile forming on her face.

“In principle, forbidden grimoires are only allowed to be replicated by hand. Recently, there has been talk of copying this particular tome. So I’ve been looking for a part-time assistant who I can trust to do the job.”

“... Such a crafty, shrewd woman.”

“I’d prefer you call me a nice and kind teacher. And before I forget, I should warn you not to get any funny ideas. You might be able to glean many secrets from this, but in the end the only one allowed to practise them is the Wiseman.”

A wry smile crept its way onto the normally unsmiling Loki’s face.

Really— such a crafty, shrewd woman she was.

(4)

The attack that hit Raishin on the neck felt like a horse had kicked him.

It was a force strong enough to crush human vertebrae. Raishin flew like a cannonball, crashing into the sand slope.

Tumbling down, he sprang to his feet on reflex. It wasn't so much as he was kicked then he had jumped himself, but even then it didn't diminish the pain, which shot through his brain.

A beat later Henri screamed, curling up into a ball where she stood.

Raishin didn't have the luxury of caring about her at the moment. He strained his eyes, trying to spot his attacker.

Suddenly, the figure of his attacker vanished.

A chill went down his spine. Reflexively he threw himself forward, somersaulting to the front in an evasive manoeuvre. A kick landed where he was a moment ago, causing the sand to spurt into the air like a fountain.

It was very fast. When had the mysterious figure moved behind him? While rolling on the floor he searched for the mysterious figure's presence. When he finally located it, he was surprised to find it was human shaped.

By the light of the fire he saw the figure had silver hair— or was it gold?

He had a nicely tailored suit on, looked like he was in his twenties, and his face was hidden behind a pair of tinted glasses.

The man was floating in the air. His polished shoes barely skimmed the surface of the sand.

The man glided smoothly in the air, silently charging towards Raishin.

As he thought, this guy was fast. The trajectory of his movement was almost the same as Cherubim, but there were definitely some differences. The man accelerated suddenly. Obviously, Raishin's reflexes were too slow to react.

He couldn't dodge this— he was going to be killed!

There was a mysterious whoosh, and a pink shadow cut in in front of him.

(Nadeshiko?)

But he knew the truth. That wasn't Nadeshiko.

The automaton maiden protected Raishin, blocking the man's kick.

There was a dull thud as the heavy kick landed. However the maiden didn't break, easily fending it off with a single hand.

"Hotaru. Catch him."

"Yes, Master. As you wish."

Having received her master's command, waves of magic energy began to crest from her body.

A heat haze formed; the surrounding air distorting. As it grew hotter, the air began to glow.

It was so bright it gave off the illusion that the sun had risen inside. The atmosphere around the maiden turned white hot, and a dust cloud of sand was blown up as she accelerated with explosive force.

Raishin wasn't sure when she had pulled it out, but the maiden was brandishing a knife as she charged towards the man.

As she slashed, the atmosphere was literally ripped apart. However, the man saw through her attack. Undaunted by her speed, he dodged the incoming knife.

He kicked, she blocked. She slashed, he dodged, and returned the blow. The shockwave generated this time sent a violent gale roaring throughout the place. Henri covered her head in her hands, unable to stand. The headmaster was—unknown. Raishin couldn't afford to turn his head away.

He continued to watch the battle, unable to even blink.

The man's movements had no inertia generated from his momentum. Additionally, it looked like he was unaffected by gravity. It was as if he was a man eating shark, moving freely inside the ocean.

On the other hand, Hotaru—the fake Nadeshiko was also an enigma. He wondered what her limits were, since in addition to her fearsome explosive power, she was also displaying remarkable resiliency and endurance.

(Just what magic circuit did that guy install inside her...?!)

It was similar to Yaya. But since there was heat haze involved, maybe it was a magic art related to heat...?

This caused him to recall Cherubim. But this was clearly different from the Jet circuit. The maiden hadn't used hot air to propel herself, it was definitely her leg power that generated the jumping force.

Suddenly, an obvious doubt popped itself into Raishin's head.

Who, or what was the attacker?

His reasons for attacking were unknown as well, but first and foremost— was he even human?

The man was fighting on equal footing with one of Magnus's automata. The movements he was performing were definitely not human. However, no matter how hard he searched, Raishin couldn't locate the presence of a puppeteer.

Also, the man's kicks had finally broken the maiden's knife.

The man's heel was aimed right at her head. If it made direct contact she would be decapitated clean in one kick, but the maiden crossed her arms together and blocked the man's kick.

An explosive wind erupted. Blown away by the gale, Henri was sent tumbling over to where he was. Grabbing onto her shoulder, Raishin pulled her towards him as he continued to stare at the source of the gale.

The two of them were still going strong. Just as they engaged in a fresh exchange of blows, a beam of light shone in all of a sudden.

It was faint, but it was assuredly a beam of light. Illuminating the darkness, perhaps it was from a floodlight or sorts.

The man instantly reacted to the light. He sprung into the air without delay, accelerating instantly as was his habit, disappearing into the darkness.

— He escaped, or so it would seem.

They were both still in it, so why had he fled?

Who was he? What was the meaning of the whole affair? Was I his target from the very beginning?

With not a clue as to what was going on, Raishin could only stare dumbfounded when there was a sudden clapping of hands behind him.

“Bravo, Magnus.”

It was the headmaster. The great man was smiling broadly as he happily praised Magnus.

“Such fine dexterity. If he were to face you at full strength surely he wouldn’t be a match for you. I feel proud knowing that such a fine puppeteer as yourself is studying at my academy.”

Magnus gave a little bow. The fake Nadeshiko silently bowed as well.

“Hm, it looked like he was after me.”

The headmaster spoke like he was giving a reminder to them.

Or rather, Raishin had the feeling that the headmaster was telling them to read it as that.

“It’s a pity he got away, but all’s well that ends well. Are you fine, Raishin?”

“... Ah yeah, I’m fine.”

“Good, good. Look, help has arrived.”

The sounds of numerous footsteps approaching was accompanied by floodlights.

Finally, accompanied with several puppeteers in tow, a beautiful blonde woman appeared. With them were two automata which had arms like logs, and three Heimguarders.

The beautiful woman had a stern expression on her face. For some reason she gave off the same air as Kimberly, but instead of a skirt she had on a pair of pants instead. A sabre was carelessly slung around her waist.

The smell of blood wafted over from the sabre... or so he felt.

“Are you alright, headmaster?”

“Hm, it is as you can see, Avril.”

“That’s a disappointment then.”

She spoke without so much as a smile, barking out orders sharply to her subordinates.

“All units, right face. Grab the kids and escort them to the surface. Also, while you’re at it you can bring the gramps along as well.”

“Avril...”

The beautiful woman ignored the headmaster’s pitiable voice, and started walking ahead of the rest.

(5)

Since Henri couldn’t walk, she was being carried by an automaton.

It was a giant type automaton that looked very strong. Its large arms gave it a strong sense of reassurance, making it surprisingly pleasant.

After taking a long and roundabout trip, they finally managed to head upwards. By the time they emerged from the labyrinthine underground, it was already past three in the afternoon.

The sudden increase in brightness from the outside light scorched his retinas, causing Raishin to shield his eyes with his hand.

The western sky had a slight yellow tinge to it, telling all that dusk was approaching soon.

It looked like their arrival had been phoned in ahead of time, for the security personnel and executive committee members came to receive them. They were near the field used for mock battles, and they emerged from a building which had dozens of iron bars arranged in a lattice, like the building itself was a prison.

“A long time ago, a facility meant to be used for magic arts experimentation was planned to be built here, to make use of this natural cave. However as it turned out, the place was too big and dangerous, so it was sealed off to this day.”

The headmaster explained it to him. Although he felt it was a crock of lies, Raishin feigned comprehension.

After having received a check up from the medical team, the first order of business was to dismiss their little group.

“Raishin!”

A familiar voice called out to him from the mock battle field.

Jumping clean over the security guards, Yaya came flying towards him.

Clinging to his waist, Yaya started to cry.

“Yaya was so worried... so worried...!”

Raishin ruffled her hair as he said,

“Sorry. But you don’t have to cry like that. I won’t die so easily.”

“What if Raishin and that vixen ended up... making out.”

“I see. Next time worry more for my safety.”

“I did! If your life is in danger, the fear helps to make love between a man and a woman stronger!”

“You’ve read too much books. Nothing happened... ok?”

“You looked away! Raishin, why did you look away!?”

“No, really, nothing happened... ok?”

He didn’t know whether the suspension bridge effect was real or not, but there was no denying that the distance between him and Henri was shrank.

Peeling Yaya off him, Raishin searched for Henri.

Amidst the sea of security personnel and executive committee members crawling about the place, he spotted a familiar figure.

It was a side profile of a gentle face. It was the Gryphon dormitory’s boarding mistress. Her arm wrapped around a shoulder of another girl who had her back to Raishin, staring off into the distance— Henri. He wanted to go check up on her and pat her on the back for making it through, but since the boarding mistress was already there, he felt like he didn’t need to worry, although he felt not talking to Henri was regrettable.

“... Hm, Yaya? Hey, what are you up to?”

Yaya had forcefully grabbed his hand, and was now dragging Raishin somewhere.

He didn’t understand what was going on, but by the time he realised where he was they were now away from the mock battle field and standing inside a grove of broadleaf trees.

Dragging him into the thicket, Yaya had a touch of complaint in her voice.

“Take off your pants!”

“I refuse! Why the sudden request!?”

“In that case just show me your naked body!”

“That’s the same thing you idiot!”

“Ah, enough!”

Yaya glared at Raishin, tears forming in her eyes.

“Why is it you keep refusing to embrace Yaya all the time!?”

“Beca—... at least say it in an indirect manner you fool!”



“Sexual In—“

“That’s even worse— waitwaitwait! Why are you stripping now!?”

Yaya loosened the cord on her clothing, exposing her naked upper body with a flourish.

Flawless white skin, so beautiful it was almost horrible to look at. The area from her shoulders to her chest were freely exposed, but the obi around her waist was still tied on, making her look indecently erotic.

All this even though there was a large crowd of people less than ten metres nearby. Yaya was completely ignoring the place and situation they were in. Yaya slowly approached the panicking Raishin—

Then suddenly, she snapped.

“So you really... do hate Yaya... after all...”

“Get dressed. I already said I don’t hate you.”

“But... you didn’t even react at all...”

“Where did you just look? What did a young girl just fixate on?”

“It’s not like Raishin is unable to, I’ve already confirmed that...”

“When did you!? Also, hurry up and put on your clothes!”

Grabbing the collar of her kimono, he forcibly dressed her. After covering her chest, he felt safe. Just as he breathed a sigh of relief, there was the sound of glass breaking.

Yaya’s eyes rapidly lost their vitality as she turned into a literal doll.

She had stopped crying, and there was a vacant and lifeless smile forming on her face.

“Ufufu... Oh Raishin... Fufu... Don’t do that...”

Was she talking to herself?

No. She enjoying a conversation, but with the oak tree in front of her!

It looked like she was under the delusion that the oak tree was her ideal Raishin.

Yaya was leaning onto the tree, a blissful smile on her face.

“Yes, Raishin. Yaya will always be here. Forever and ever— <3”

Raishin shivered.

This was bad. Yaya was worth as much as a military battleship. If she broke, Raishin would never be able to pay off the repair cost in this lifetime. Furthermore, if Yaya wasn’t around he wouldn’t be able to take part in the Night Party!

Raishin desperately grabbed Yaya by the shoulders, shaking her back and forth.

“Yaya, return to your senses! Come back, please!”

“Fufufu... Raishin... Raishin... Raishin... Raishin... Raishin... <3”

Yaya wasn’t looking in his direction, even though Raishin was this close to her now!

Her pent-up dissatisfaction and resentment, coupled with her worry over whether Raishin was dead or alive, in addition to his return, was causing her emotions to run wild.

Not to mention, Raishin had continued to push her away. Yaya had tried to express her love with her whole body, but he had coldly refused her.

At this point, he could no longer just brush her off.

If he didn’t explain himself clearly now, Yaya would never be able to understand.

“... Of all people, I especially didn’t want to tell you this.”

With that as the preface, Raishin finally told the secret he had been hiding from her for two years.

“I have a fiancée.”

“Eh—?”

It worked. Yaya snapped back to her senses, having taken the bait.

“That’s a lie! Raishin... we’ve been together two years, and this is the first time I’m hearing of such a thing...!”

“There wasn’t a good time to tell you. Also, well, I mean... I was terrified.”

“You were terrified you’d destroy your relationship with Yaya...?”

“No, I was terrified you’d destroy my body.”

“Raishin... how could you... lie to Yaya all this while...”

“Wai— Hold on. I never lied to you ok? I didn’t do anything of the sort. In any case, listen to the end— calm down!”

He was being strangled and lifted up by the neck. He could feel the blood being cut off, his consciousness rapidly fading away. Just before his throat was crushed, Raishin managed to shout out.

“I-I’m not getting married!”

“...Eh?”

“I was trying to tell you, I don’t have any intention of getting married!”

Yaya had a puzzled look on her face. Releasing the strength in her fingers, Raishin dropped to the ground.

Coughing and spluttering, Raishin breathed in deeply, getting vital oxygen back into his system.

“What do you mean you’re not getting married?”

“I-it was something my parents decided on their own, and besides the Akabane clan is all but destroyed now. To be betrothed now would be ridiculous. However, the engagement hasn’t been officially called off yet. And so, until the engagement is broken off, I won’t get close to other women. My sense of duty prevents it.”

“... Raishin is such a straight-laced person.”

“Did you just click your tongue?”

Raishin rubbed his throat, giving a self-depreciating laugh.

“In any case, she’s like a mountain flower out of my reach. We wouldn’t be a good fit for each other.”

“Does that... does that mean you love her that much...!?”

“No! Don’t make such a big misunderstanding!”

“But if you really don’t have any lingering affection for her, why haven’t you called it off yet!?”

“Well, that is... the other party refused to call it off...”

Just as the words left his mouth, he froze. Saying such dangerous words were practically a suicide attempt!

Fortunately, Yaya didn’t seem to have caught it. She had quickly cheered up, and was now smiling happily.

“If you don’t have any intention to marry, then that means there’s no obstacle standing in the way of our love, right?”

Yaya was beaming happily. Raishin felt relieved. There was no worry behind the smile. The current Yaya was the same as before he had met Frey.

“Yeah, there isn’t.”

“In that case, please take off your pants!”

“Dammit, have you even been listening to a word I’ve said?!”

While this was going on, there was a certain someone hiding in the nearby thicket eavesdropping.

Grasping her knees together, she was sitting next to a large wolf-dog with black fur.

It was Frey. She was with the group of people that had gone to receive them, but because the security personnel had obstructed her, she had missed her opportunity to call out to Raishin.

When she heard him talk about a fiancée, Frey froze up.

Both hands gripping onto the muffler around her neck, she began to unconsciously crush the fabric together.

Fiancée. Fiancée. Frey was especially sensitive to sound. When Raishin had said the word, she had clearly sensed there was a strange warmth in his voice.

She bit her lip at the appearance of a strong rival.

“... It couldn’t be...”

Someone’s figure popped into her mind, startling her. It was probably no more than women’s intuition; then again it was indeed a possible fantasy.

Unease grew and spread within her chest, and Frey trembled slightly.

Her partner Rabi started to sniff, pushing his nose against her in an attempt to comfort her.

Frey stroked his fluffy fur, burying her face into Rabi's neck.

He smelt of sunshine, earth and grass.

Rabi's smell helped her calm down, and killing off their presence, she stood up.

Mounting herself onto Rabi's back, she started off. Dashing out of the grove in one burst, she returned back onto the main street. Suddenly though, Rabi came to a halt, his ears raised.

His head raised, he began to look around the area. Clearly, something had alerted him and he was now on his guard.

Finally, accompanied with the fluttering of wings, a large shadow descended.

It was a dignified and heroic figure. Rabi himself was a large dog, but this figure was several times his size.

It was a silhouette with four wings, and there was someone standing in its back, staring in Frey's direction.

“T-Rex!”

Frey's eyes widened in surprise as she stared at a junior who was in the same dormitory as her— although now she was considered ‘missing’— calling out her nickname.

Chapter 5 – Failure is Forbidden

(1)

At eight in the evening, Raishin made his way down to the field of battle.

With having to call Shouko in secret and compiling the report he was already behind on, he ended up being completely late. Frey was nowhere to be seen. Checking in with the executive committee member in charge, it seemed like Frey had yet to show up.

The students in the gallery looked bored since the fight hadn't started yet.

An hour passed and still no one showed up.

"It looks like our opponent isn't coming today."

Next to him, Yaya spoke while pressing her hands against her chest.

"We should go back. You're still not in best shape after all."

They had been on stage for an hour. In accordance with the guidelines, Raishin had fulfilled the duty required of him. The executive committee member recognised this, and at last, he could return back to the dormitory.

However, Raishin didn't move, staring intently at a stone pillar instead.

"Raishin...?"

"Frey aside— The 87th seat avoided us both yesterday and today."

"It's definitely because he's scared of Raishin."

Yaya happily said. However, Raishin had a difficult look on his face as he sank deep into thought.

"Not good. This is becoming quite the pickle."

"What do you mean?"

"If it was just yesterday, it would mean the 87th seat was working alone. However, since the 86th seat didn't appear today as well..."

"Since?"

"Well, ultimately the one in control tonight is the 86th seat. For the 87th seat to go about preparing some form of sabotage with confidence, he would have to know that the 86th seat wasn't appearing tonight. To choose to exempt himself

from appearing on the field of battle, it would signify the 86th seat was abandoning the fight against a stronger opponent.”

“So, the two of them are accomplices...?”

“It looks like it. Furthermore, since the 86th seat didn’t show up tonight...”

Yaya understood. With both hands covering her mouth, she looked shocked.

“Tomorrow, there will be three of them—!”

“It is quite possible this might stretch a lot further than just three people.”

If Raishin had to guess, they were most likely accumulating comrades to cut their way through the Night Party.

From the 97th seat onwards, Frey had triumphed in one-on-one fights. Loki was much stronger than Frey, and Raishin was the dark horse. For the current class of Night Party participants, these three were extremely strong foes to go up against.

Now the only question was whether they had decided to co-operate on the spur of the moment, or whether the collusion had taken place in advance.

“The road ahead looks like it’s going to be quite scary. However, there are also favourable points.”

“Eh, favourable points?”

“Time to return to the dorm. Let’s go, Yaya.”

“Ok, but what are we going to do for tomorrow’s Night Party? Do you have a plan in mind?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. Before we worry about tomorrow though, we should worry about tonight.”

Yaya gulped, coming to a stop. She felt a horrible premonition. Her vision wavered, before slowing looking up at Raishin.

Raishin laughed fearlessly while nodding,

“Tonight, we’re going to catch a shark.”

(2)

Leaving the field, Raishin returned to the dormitory, stopping in front of his room.

“Raishin, the light’s on...”

Yaya murmured a warning to him. Raishin ignored it, brazenly opening the door.

The scent of jasmine and thick smoke assaulted his senses. The room was filled with tobacco smoke whirling about, and the smell of the tobacco caused him to cough a little involuntarily.

The cause of the smoke was a woman, who was sitting down next to the windowsill.

She was a bewitching beauty whose open kimono revealed her voluptuous breasts. It was Karyuusai Shouko.

At her feet, a large amount of tobacco ash had been carelessly discarded.

Shouko tapped her pipe, causing more ash to fall, before speaking in an off-handed manner.

“I wonder, how many years has it been since tobacco tasted this bad?”

“... I’m sorry. Because of all my selfishness—”

“Not even the dignitaries in the military have managed to do this, you know. To order me, the great Karyuusai, around as you see fit.”

Shouko reached inside her sleeve, pulling out a sheaf of papers.

She threw it onto the table with a thud. There were letters almost calligraphy-like in their beauty, schematic diagrams of the human body, and countless number crammed onto the paper.

“As you can see, everything is normal. There are no problems with that girl’s body whatsoever. You could even say she’s in superior condition. Are you satisfied now, Master Raishin?”

“Thanks for the info. So Henri’s herself is alright?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“I got it. Thanks, and sorry for making you go to all that trouble.”

Shouko fixed him with a piercing gaze, speaking with a tone that made it sound like she was confirming something.

“It’s a promise, boy. This is the last selfishness of yours I’ll indulge. From now on, you better listen to the military’s orders.”

“Yeah.”

“Stop your childish behaviour. If you keep it up, I’m afraid I won’t be able to be to pamper you anymore.”

She lifted her chest up suggestively as she said so.

Raishin felt the blood rush to his nose, hurriedly turning around.

“Stop joking with me like that.”

“Raishin... since when... did the both of you...!”

“Nothing happened! Shouko’s just being an unreasonable tease!”

“Unreasonable tease!? What do you means by that!? What did you two do?!”

Yaya was blowing her top. Slipping behind her, Shouko wordlessly exited the room.

Although she had been the same as always, it looked like Shouko had really been in a grumpy mood.

Even so, she had put in a lot of effort for Raishin's sake.

Raishin inwardly bowed to her, sending Shouko off with his eyes.

After letting her calm down, Yaya eventually drew towards Raishin with a worried look on her face.

“Raishin...Did you make a deal with Shouko?”

“Yeah.”

“These documents are Henriette's biological reports, aren't they? In exchange for Shouko investigating Henriette, did you agree to back away from the matter totally?”

“Yeah.”

“In that case, it means you're not going to be reckless anymore, right?”

“No. I feel bad about doing this to Shouko, but thanks to her we should be able to proceed successfully.”

“Eh... You lied to Shouko?”

“There's no one on earth who can fool Shouko.”

She had understood, and given her tacit approval. Which explained her grumpy mood earlier.

“But, Shouko is also someone who won't forgive betrayal. If you really end up betraying her...”

It could be said this was the last chance Shouko had given to him.

If Raishin really did end up betraying Shouko's trust, he had no idea what she would do.

With determination hidden in his eyes though, Raishin spoke like it was nothing.

"In the first place, I'm just a helpless idiot. Didn't you know that?"

"But Raishin, you have a goal! It's the reason why you came all the way to England! Because Nadeshiko is so important, Raishin, you..."

"Even now, I still regret I couldn't protect Nadeshiko."

Raishin confessed his true feelings.

"It's because I am a weak human. The regret I feel might be the reason for my hatred. Killing him won't bring Nadeshiko back to life. Revenge is just something I know is for my own self-satisfaction. Even so... that's all I can do for Nadeshiko."

"Then, why...?"

"I don't want to experience the same regret as before. In the end, I guess it's for my own sake. Because I am a weak human—I don't ever want to experience regret again."

Placing his hand onto Yaya's shoulder, he stared straight into her black eyes.

"This isn't an order from the military, in fact it might be a violation of their wishes. Also, it means I'll be going against Shouko's wishes. Knowing all this, will you lend me your strength, Yaya?"

"... Raishin, you should know it by now."

She placed her hand over his and gave him a gentle smile.

"Yaya is Raishin's doll. Yaya will protect Raishin, no matter what happens."

“... Thanks. But I promise you this; I will try my best to make sure you don’t suffer a single scratch as well.”

“Raishin... <3”

“After all, I don’t want to be scolded by Shouko anymore than I already have.”

There was a snap.

“Shouko, Shouko, Shouko... Again with Shouko...!”

“... Hm, Yaya? W—wait a minute! You just said you’d protect me!”

“Raishin is an idiot!”

Confused over what was going on, Raishin flusteredly flew out of the room.

(3)

It was just about midnight. Pushing through the cool night breeze, a maiden with thirteen dogs in tow was walking through the grove of trees in the dead of the night.

It was Frey. She was taking the Garm automata on a walk along the road leading back from the Night Party.

“Say, Rabi. What do you think the T-Rex meant... when she spoke to us this afternoon?”

The sound of Rabi’s paws hitting the ground was the only reply she got as Rabi looked up inquiringly at his mistress’s face. Unfortunately, since he had the intelligence of a mere dog, he couldn’t be expected to understand the question.

“T-Rex... She looked like she was suffering...”

Her voice had been strained when she revealed her secret, the grief present plain to see. Frey understood then. Charl was overdoing it. Contrary to what she said, she was surely waiting for him to come...

Suddenly, the dogs came to a halt.

Surprised, she looked ahead. It was the Gryphon dormitory. Shattering the beautiful silhouette was a bug like thing slithering up one of the walls.

Actually, it was bigger than a bug. It looked like a human... A pervert?

Using a window sill as a foothold, the person clinging to the wall was a male student.

(That's... Raishin?!)

He was peeking into one of the rooms on the third floor. It was Charl and Henri's room.

Frey was stunned. Was Raishin really sneaking into Henri's room for a secret night-time visit?!

While Frey was in a panicked state, Raishin had kicked the window open and crept in.

Should she call for help? Dash over and question him? Or turn a blind eye to the whole thing?

While her brain went into overdrive, Raishin had already jumped out of the window.

Yaya had appeared out of nowhere, giving Raishin a hand as they descended from the window.

There was a girl in a negligee slung over his shoulder— if she had to guess it was probably Henri.

“Raishin... is eloping with Henri...!?”

Frey muttered the first thought that popped into her mind.

(4)

“Raishin Akabane is the black sheep of his family?”

A look of surprise made its way onto a well-bred face.

Inside the chairman’s office of the executive committee, the youth who was said chairman elegantly placed his teacup down.

There were two others inside the room. Shin was standing in front of the table, and Ravena— who was really Charl in disguise— was sitting in a corner of the room, hugging her dove.

Shin nodded at his master’s words.

“The Akabanes were a clan whose talents were widely known, but it appears **Second Last** did not associate himself with the clan, and he received no training in the magic arts whatsoever.”

“I thought his grades were the result of the language barrier, but it appears he’s a genuine idiot.”

“It is as you say. As a magician, he’s essentially on the same level as an amateur.”

“Then Felix was an idiot as well. How could he have let an dunce like him interfere with his plans?”

He brought the black tea to his lips— then appeared to have realised something as he placed the cup back on its saucer.

“Is something the matter?”

“I just had a thought. Perhaps the guard dogs at Nectar aren’t marking Raishin Akabane per say— rather they’re actually fixating on that automaton of his.”

“Are you referring to the doll with the Kongouriki circuit...?”

“If the data is correct, then how do I put it... It’s so boring. Such a simple magic circuit, wouldn’t you agree?”

The youth had a thoughtful look in his eyes as his gaze fell upon the wall.

“Hardening all monads within an internal field of control to an extreme level, and as a result the subsequent output of strength is increased a thousand-fold. The concept itself is simple and solid enough, but then again it’s filled with so many weaknesses.”

“It is as you say. No matter how you look at it, surely this circuit is overrated?”

“It is possible. However, if the circuit does turn out to live up to the expectations...”

He flashed a meaningful look at his servant.

“Then that doll might actually be very similar to you, Shin.”

Charl’s hands suddenly froze up.

“I don’t know whether this is true or not, but it seems like the puppet maker Karyuusai actually ‘made a human.’”

“— Surely that is just idle gossip?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why, if I may ask?”

“Well, if it weren’t true, then wouldn’t it make things extremely boring?”

He laughed innocently. Almost instantly though, the laugh vanished, replaced by a serious look on his face as he removed the crystal ball from his breast pocket. It was as if someone who wasn’t present in this room had just contacted him.

The youth stared intently into his crystal ball— then suddenly burst out into laughter.

“Something fascinating has just happened. **Second Last** has just kidnapped Henriette.”

For a brief moment, a small snort of laughter cut in.

It was Charl. She had a hand to her mouth, stifling her laugh.

“Oh, Ravena. What is so funny, I wonder?”

“It’s because you treated him like an idiot that this happened. How does it feel to be thoroughly outwitted by someone you took for a fool?”

“That’s a rather abrupt change of heart, you trollop. After cozying up to Felix, now you’re spreading your legs for the Oriental monkey?”

“!”

“What’s the matter? You’ve turned completely red. Isn’t a little too late to act all embarrassed now? Weren’t you happily mewling like a little kitten in Felix’s presence?”

“How da— Don’t be ridiculous!”

Charl’s face was bright red, but not because of embarrassment.

She was angry. Her pride had been hurt, and she was extremely upset. It was an extremely humiliating thing to say, and as a daughter of the House of Belew, she couldn’t let an insult to her face like that just slide!

The boy had a surprised look on his face.

“I see, who would have thought you were an unspoilt flower... In that case, why don’t I throw you naked into a den of hooligans? I’m pretty sure something enjoyable will happen, you know?”

In an instant, the anger in Charl’s eyes vanished.

“... Do as you please.”

In an icy voice, she threw him a dirty look, before turning away.

Although she wasn't bursting with anger anymore, her current attitude was essentially the same.

However, the youth didn't seem slighted by it in the slightest, and continued grinning.

"You have my sympathies, Charlotte. The great house of Belew, renowned for its valour, now reduced to a mere shadow of its former self. The former Earl left his wife and children behind to venture into the continent and vanished there, and facing the spectre of poverty, the lady Belew finally sold her own daughter away. Should I tell you something good? Henriette was about to be sold to a brothel when I rescued her."

"— You lie! My mother would rather starve to death than to sell Henri away!"

"The truth can be so cruel. So how does it feel? I'm sure your mother burdened you with a sense of responsibility too, didn't she? While acting out the part of a gentle sister looking out for her younger sister, I'm sure you're inwardly basking in your sense of superiority, aren't you?"

"... Sense of superiority?"

"God sure has sophisticated tastes. He made the elder sister beautiful and cultured, giving her an abundance of magic energy, while the younger sister didn't get a single good trait at all. Thanks to that the elder sister is always in a good mood. As long as the younger sister is by her side, she can feel the gifts she's been truly blessed with. Even if the younger sister can't do anything— or rather, because the younger sister can't do anything, once she's not around the elder sister would be troubled, no?"

"You're wrong! I've never thought lik—"

"And that's the real reason why the great T-Rex, who hates everyone else, would go so far as to saving a trash of a younger sister, even if it meant great sacrifice to her. Dear me, sisterly love is such a wonderful thing."

Charl's shoulders trembled slightly. Tears of vexation were beginning to form around her eyes.

The youth started to get ahead of himself, pouring on the scorn onto Charl even further.

“You know, that talk we had earlier about throwing you to a bunch of hooligans was just that— a talk. I suppose I could throw your sister to them instead— I wonder what kind of face would the great T-Rex make then?”

There was a burst of magic energy, a bluish white flame forming in an instant.

Charl's body was radiating the fire, and Sigmund's dove form was surrounded by a dark aura that was mystical in nature. The strength of it was such that the naked eye, let alone a magician, was able to see the effects.

“If you ever do anything to Henri... I will hunt you down and wipe out your entire bloodline...!”

There was a sharp crack as something hit Charl on the cheek.

Her face struck, Charl fell onto the ground.

The youth slowly glanced over to the side, where Shin was standing with his head slightly raised.

“I apologise for acting out of turn. However, I cannot and will not ignore anyone who acts toward the young master in such an insolent manner. Even if said action is a result of the young master's rotten nature, or his warped character.”

“Ok Shin, that's enough. Your punishment will come later. Leaving that aside for now, we really can't afford to let Henriette slip out of our fingers.”

“Should I attend to it?”

“... It would be boorish to turn down such an invitation. You're right, I'll leave this matter in your hands.”

“Very well, I will capture her post-haste. What about **Second Last**?”

“You can kill him. And bring his freshly severed head to me. Since we’re going to all that trouble, it would make a fine present for the trollop here. Will you be able to do that?”

“That’s an extremely sick hobby to have, but if it’s an order from the young master, it will be a piece of cake.”

Shin bowed slightly, then flew out of the window.

“Hm? You look like you have something you want to say, Charlotte.”

“... What are you planning? Why are you doing this to us?”

“If by this you’re referring to my treatment of you sisters? Well, the reason is simple, really. I think it’s fun.”

“—!”

“Besides, if I bully you Felix will be gratified, you know? The two of us— Felix and Cedric are cousins after all, and that makes us close friends.”

“That’s a lie! There’s no way you’re Cedric!”

“Huh, what an interesting thing to say. Especially when the real deal is standing right in front of you.”

“Don’t play dumb with me! You’re obviously using a magic art that lets you change your form—“

A hint of fear crept into her voice, and she faltered.

Realising that she was going up against an enemy she had no clue about, her heart felt like it was crushed into a million pieces.

A slow and steady stream of tears began to trickle down as she asked in a trembling voice.

“Who... are you? Just who... or what are you?!”

The youth laughed airily.

“I am a shadow.”

Happily, in a sing-song voice, he appeared to almost dance as he continued to speak.

“I am a shadow with no real form.”

(5)

“Nooo... I’m being abducted by a foreign barbarian... he’s going to assault me!”

“Stop ruining people’s reputations! I’m trying to save you here, ok!”

Raishin rebuked her in a loud voice. Holding on to the negligee-clad Henri, he was sprinting through the forest in the dead of night. From a bystander’s point of view, this could only be a kidnapping in progress.

Yaya was right behind him, while guarding the rear.

Henri had no idea what was going on, but she stopped her futile resistance.

Once the luggage he was carrying had settled down, Raishin could pick up the pace. Dashing clear off the main street, he stopped precisely between the gate and the Gryphon dormitory.

“This should be good enough. If we get any closer to the gate, the guards will notice us.”

He lowered Henri. He still couldn’t feel any sensation in his bad right shoulder.

“Please... explain what is going on.”

Henri timidly spoke up. Glancing over at Yaya, he noted that she looked like she had questions of her own as well. Now that he thought about it, he never did explain in detail to her too.

Nodding, Raishin opened his mouth, a hint of cross examination in his tone.

“So basically, the reason why Charl has been on her ridiculous rampage is because you’re being held hostage, right?”

“... Yes.”

He thought she would have tried to conceal it, but to his surprise, Henri nodded frankly.

Yaya tilted her head in bewilderment.

“What do you mean, Raishin?”

“Henri said herself that she’s scared of dying. That means it’s not that she ‘wants to die’, it’s ‘it would be better if she was dead’.”

“Eh... Why is that?”

“I thought about it too. One explanation stood out; if she were to die, then someone’s— Charl’s ‘weak point’ would be effectively gone. Once I reached that conclusion, I understood the rationale behind the scary dragoness’s recent ridiculous behaviour. In a nutshell, someone has told Charl ‘Kill the Headmaster or your sister dies.’”

It was simplistic reasoning. Even Yaya was able to connect the dots inside her head.

“Ah, so that’s why you called Shouko... You suspect there’s something embedded inside her body.”

“Yeah. It might be a magic art in the form of a bomb, or some sort of poison.”

That was why he had gone to all the trouble of getting Shouko down, to take a look at Henri.

“But in the end, there was no such thing attached inside her...”

“From the very beginning, Henri was under constant surveillance by a certain someone.”

“Eh... Constant?”

“Henri has attempted suicide seven times. Even so, she’s still alive and here right now. Which means there was someone who has been stopping her. Someone who would be extremely troubled if their hostage were to die.”

Henri clenched her fists and stared downward at the ground. Her expression was that of one on the verge of tears, which meant Raishin’s conjecture was essentially the truth.

“You’re right... but it’s useless. There’s no way I can escape. It is simply... not possible to bring me to a place where I can escape this surveillance.”

“That’s not the plan at all. The running stops here.”

“Eh...?”

Yaya and Henri’s voices rang out in unison.

“We’re dealing with a bunch of professional villains, aren’t we? Once they find out I’ve stolen their hostage, obviously they will—“

Raishin’s ear twitched and he grinned.

“— perform a retrieval.”

With a whoosh, something flew towards Raishin, stopping right in front of him.

Although the person himself had come to a complete halt, the air he had displaced did not. The gale generated stirred up the sand and caused Yaya's hair to become dishevelled.

While Henri let out a sigh of despair, in contrast Raishin was grinning happily as he spoke.

“As expected, that was a quick reaction. You're such skilled hunting dog, we didn't have to wait long.”

“If I weren’t skilled as a butler how could I ever hope to serve the young master adequately?”



Butler. Looking at his attire, Raishin finally understood. Although his suit appeared to be tailor made and looked high class, there was some restraint in his manner and he gave off a plain air than was more suited to an ordinary person. However—

“A butler with tinted lenses? Are you some kind of delinquent butler?”

“Butlers are allowed to wear casual wear as well you know.”

Raishin eyed his opponent warily.

This was the same person who attacked him underground earlier. He had a slim frame, and although he didn't bring along an automaton... Raishin could still feel some form of hidden magic energy inside him. Perhaps he really was a magus.

“You don't look like you're from the Kingsfort side... or are you?”

“Hm, I wonder about that?”

“If you really are a butler, you'll be spilling your guts after a little introduction to pain... but I guess not, huh?”

“Even if that was the case, what then?”

“I would forcibly continue investigating, find your rotten-in-the-head master, and then drag him out into the open.”

“—Rotten?”

“Isn't that the case? How else would you want me to classify someone who kidnapped Henri and forced Charl to assassinate the Headmaster?”

“... It's true that the young master's brain is in a state of constant excitement, and the young master would much rather scheme than eat. With such a warped mentality, sooner or later the house of Granville is bound to collapse. “

“Oh, you really are quite the skilled butler. Did you just tell us your boss's name?”

“If I weren’t skilled as a butler how could I ever hope to serve the young master adequately? However, I won’t say I’m completely perfect. If I had to name a flaw for example—“

He smiled lightly, but his voice was as cold as ice.

“I would say I’m a little quick to anger.”

In a swift motion, he flew to a tree by the road and crushed it with a kick.

The wood snapped without resistance. Behind those glasses, Raishin could see an irrepressible anger burning inside his eyes. It seemed that he took great offense to Raishin badmouthing his master.

Telling them his master’s name was his own version of a death sentence.

He wasn’t going let anyone live to tell the tale, puppet or human.

“Let’s go Yaya. We’ll crush him, and then go save Charl!”

“Ok!”

The curtain opened on a battle they couldn’t afford to lose.

(6)

As long as there’s evidence, there’s no problem— that’s what Kimberly had said.

And right now, the irrefutable evidence he needed was charging towards him.

Well actually, it wasn’t evidence just yet. First they either had to capture him, or skilfully cajole the information out of him that would reveal the true mastermind behind the whole affair.

Letting him escape was fine, but at the very least they had to win. As long as Henri’s safety could be guaranteed, she could go public with her story.

“Stick by me, Henri.”

Raishin hid Henri behind her back, squaring off against the enemy.

The person who made the first move was the one opposite him.

He vanished in a flash. Losing sight of him unnerved Yaya slightly. Raishin was taken aback as well, but his afternoon exertions weren't in vain. He quickly focused on searching for his opponent's location, grasping it after a bit.

“Above!”

Yaya immediately raised her arms above her head. The butler appeared overhead, bringing his leg downward with power.

Raishin channelled his magic power to her. Yaya's toughness increased instantaneously, enabling her to repel the man's kick.

Almost immediately, the man vanished once again.

— Or rather, it wasn't that he vanished, but he gave off the impression that he vanished.

His movements were fast. Additionally, the laws of inertia didn't seem to apply to him. He was able to accelerate to maximum speed in an instant, and he could alter his trajectory to move at impossible angles.

Therefore, it was simply an illusion that he had vanished. Raishin realised he vanished into a blind spot.

In terms of close combat, he couldn't afford to react to his opponent's attack, given the man's speed. Instead, he would have to read his movements and act on the assumption that his predictions were correct.

Or that was the plan, but now he realised dryly that the senses he was counting on were being confused by his movements.

Raishin began to break out in cold sweat. Unrest was building up inside him, urging him to flee. At the same time, he was acutely aware of Henri behind him, which was disrupting his focus. However, the enemy did not give him the luxury

of time to sort himself out. Appearing from his right, he gave off the impression that he was charging over when he suddenly vanished, and attacked from Raishin's left.

The man's leg swung in an arc, coming diagonally downwards, crashing into Yaya like a hammer.

Yaya caught the blow, but the force of the impact caused her legs to buckle.

The strike was so heavy it caused the pavement stones to shatter.

Almost instantly, the man's figure vanished. Because his senses couldn't keep up with the man, all that was left was an afterimage burnt into Raishin's retina. The man's movement were almost like he was effortlessly gliding, disappearing again before reappearing behind Yaya.

He let a kick fly at Yaya's back. Yaya's body was able to endure the blow... but it meant that they still couldn't read or catch his movements. If they couldn't attack him, then they would never win!

(Feel it... Sense your opponent's movements directly, and see through his actions...)

Raishin focused, sharpening his senses in an attempt to get used to their opponent's movements.

However he realised it would take an excessive amount of time which they did not have the luxury of.

Having received a kick from directly below, Yaya's body was lifted into the air.

While she was airborne, the man spun once to build up momentum, channelling the force generated into another kick that sent her flying.

Soaring through the air diagonally, Yaya crashed into a large tree.

“Yaya!”

He called out to her reflexively, but immediately regretted it.

This wasn't the appropriate time to be worrying about Yaya. They were in a real battle. For the opponent at hand currently, victory wasn't a matter of beating Yaya into submission—the goal was to kill Raishin.

By the time he realised what was going on, the man had already closed the distance between them.

The man's kick was fast approaching. Pushing Henri away, Raishin dodged on sheer instinct alone. The leg swung at empty air as it finished its arc. Through sheer luck he had dodged the kick. However—

A split second later, he felt a severe weight on his abdomen.

His body was immediately lifted into the air. The fact that he had avoided a direct blow could be said to have been a miracle.

He was still being flung back. The scenery in front of him flowed past his eyes as he felt a strong wind blowing against his back.

There were several loud cracks as he felt his ribs fracture.

His nerves fired up all at once, causing waves of a sharp, burning pain to run through his brain.

He felt his consciousness fading. Just as his vision was being swallowed up by darkness—

He wasn't sure if it was a dream, but he saw her figure.

A girl whose hair was a light shade of pink.

She was standing atop a branch of a tree by the roadside, looking down upon Raishin with eyes as cold as ice.

That girl who looked exactly like Nadeshiko, just like two peas in a pod—

In an instant, a flash of anger forced Raishin's consciousness back into reality.

I can't die yet.

I can't die... until I kill Akabane Tenzen!

Turning in mid-air, he landed on the ground, coming face to face with his opponent.

However, his body was already at its limit. Pain wrecked his body, like his internal organs had been gouged out with a blade. He was coughing up a large volume of blood. Unable to stand, Raishin collapsed where he was.

“Raishin!?”

Yaya was stunned. Their opponent wasn't so generous as to spurn taking advantage of this opening.

He appeared directly above Yaya, spinning in air once, dropping a kick like lightning falling from the sky.

It was a move straight out of Yaya's playbook. His heel landed squarely on Yaya's head, causing her beautiful face to smash into the ground.

“— Oh dear, this isn't good. The young master's orders completely slipped my mind.”

Landing with a thud, he started walking slowly over towards Raishin.

“I may be skilled at being the butler of the Granville family, but I won't say I'm completely perfect. If I had to name a flaw, for example— I tend to make the occasional careless mistake— Mister Akabane, I was ordered to bring your head back.”

He could hear the footsteps coming to a halt near his ears.

“S-stop... Please stop...!”

Henri's voice was shaking, but there was a hint of resoluteness in her voice.

Of course, the man ignored her. Raising his leg up, he held it above Raishin's neck.

It looked like he was planning on crushing Raishin's neck with his foot until it was severed from the rest of his body.

His mind in a haze, Raishin prepared himself for death. He could hear Henri's screams—

With a crash, something large pierced the pavement, embedding itself into the ground.

Having narrowly avoided his leg being sliced off, the man leapt backwards.

Raishin opened his eyes to see a large sword whose tip was buried in the ground in front of him.

There was a dull gleam of steel. There was a robotic, inhuman face where the hilt was. Raishin was familiar with this polished blade and its thorny appearance.

There was a tap-tapping as the sound of crutches hitting the stone pavement could be heard. Someone was approaching them.

That someone came to a halt in front of Raishin, and began to speak.

“If I may say so myself, I am a tolerant person... However, there are three things in this world I cannot forgive. People who give me orders. People who defy me. And finally,”

There was a haughty tone in that voice.

“Bastards with bad manners who try to steal other people's prey.”

Raishin spat out blood, just managing to get his name out.

“Loki...!”

There was no mistaking it. It was Frey's younger brother, Loki. **Sacred Blaze** had arrived!

Yaya grabbed Henri, retreating behind Loki to where Raishin was.

Being lifted up by Yaya, Raishin watched over Loki's battle while still in her arms.

Cherubim's parts began to move, shifting from its large sword form to the form closer to a human's shape. At the same time, the parts on its back that resemble wings shot out eight thorns.

The thorns were short swords. They moved like they had their own wills, heading straight for their target.

However, the man glided about in the air, easily dodging. With no wasted movements or inertia affecting him, he charged towards Loki.

As he aimed a kick at Loki, Cherubim moved to protect its master, using a blade to stop the kick. There was a heavy metallic clang, and the blade bent. The force of the kick was fearsome indeed!

Cherubim swung its blade in riposte to the kick. Furthermore, the eight short swords were dancing in the air.

Raishin clicked his tongue. Loki was really on another level from him. He was able to control the swords even while fighting in close combat with Cherubim itself.

Even so though, the man was holding his own.



Spinning like a windmill, he kicked away every single one of the short swords. His speed and precision were shocking. As Raishin stared in bewilderment, the man suddenly crouched down, kicking up a pavement stone at his feet.

The stone chunk flew towards the two. Loki's vision was disrupted, causing Cherubim's movements to stop—

(He's gonna get hit now!)

However, Loki was unfazed, using the blade to cleave the stone in two. After that—

“Cherubim, whirl!”

He switched Cherubim's form.

(He's changing forms at a time like this...!?)

The large sword drew an arc in the air, flying straight down behind Loki's back.

The blade's sharpness, which could easily slice a rock in half, appeared to cut something.

(— Loki got him!)

The man's suit was ripped into tatters. However, his chest was completely unharmed. He wasn't even bleeding slightly.

On the other hand, the edge of Cherubim's blade had been damaged, becoming flat.

Even Loki narrowed his eyes at this. Raishin was suddenly reminded of a past boast Loki had made. Supposedly, there wasn't anything in existence that Cherubim couldn't slice through. But now, it seems that there was an exception to his words.

The man laughed lightly. His shoulders were slowly heaving up and down. Was he breathing a little harder or was he just seeing things?

... It was no good. His vision was blurry and he couldn't confirm his suspicions.

Yaya was wobbling slightly, and cold sweat was forming on Loki's forehead.

The situation was unfavourable. At this rate...

Just as the seed of doubt began to sprout inside him,

“Woof!” “Woof! Woof!” “Woof!”

Several howls could be heard approaching them.

Quadruped beasts burst forth from the darkness.

Frey was riding atop a dog that was conspicuously bigger than the rest. The Garm types had arrived!

As she was afraid of dogs, Henri curled up into a ball, burying her head into her chest and covering it with her hands. On the other hand, the man made a snap judgement, turning his back on Loki and fleeing into the grove of trees.

And with that, he disappeared from their sights.

“... So he escaped, did he...?”

Loki had a bitter tinge in his voice as he muttered out loud. With the threat gone, Yaya sank down onto the floor. Sensing the presence of the approaching dogs, the tension rapidly dissipated from Raishin's body.

Raishin had barely enough time to be surprised by the turn of events before his vision went completely black.

Chapter 6 – A Heartfelt Wish

(1)

Frey hadn't just brought along her Garm automata. Security personnel had arrived as well, putting Raishin on a stretcher and bringing him towards the

medical faculty. Yaya and Henri both accompanied him, leaving only Loki and Cherubim behind.

Frey trotted over to Loki's side and stared up at him.

Her gaze made him feel uncomfortable, and Loki bluntly spoke.

“What? Shouldn't you be over there with that half-dead twit?”

“Uu... I'm sorry. I-if only I had... been quicker bringing them here...”

Her head sank downwards gloomily.

“Even though I'm Loki's older sister... I couldn't be of any use...”

“Don't butt in into fights. Even if you were here, you'd only be a hindrance.”

Frey sank further into deeper gloom.

“Well, I mean... It's not in my nature to fight while protecting someone else.”

Frey raised her head.

Loki's words were extremely awkward. Even though his tone was cold, there was a hidden something inside them. Previously, Frey wasn't able to understand what Loki was actually thinking, but now she was able to see through his words.

Loki didn't want to put Frey in any sort of danger.

Frey slowly straightened up, and gave Loki a small kiss on his cheek.

“Wh- wha- what are you trying to do?!”

Loki was flustered. Unlike his normal cool self, his current state of consternation was plain for all to see.

It was completely natural for siblings to do something as simple as a peck on the cheek, but it had been a long time since the two of them had done anything like that.

“Thank you, Loki, for protecting Raishin.”

“Kimberly twisted my arm into doing it. Your thanks are not necessary!”

Violently protesting, he stormed off away from Frey in what appeared to be anger.

Cherubim whirred and clanked and it followed behind him.

“... Do you have something you want to say, Cherubim?”

[No... No... I'm ready.]

It was a plain, monotonous reply. He felt like it was laughing though. Was it his imagination?

Feeling a little vexed, Loki swung his crutch wildly, kicking a paving stone away.

(2)

From the windowsill of the chairman's office, the youth looked down upon the visage of the academy at midnight.

“It's pretty cold. If I keep pulling all-nighters like this, it'll be bad for my skin.”

While it seemed he was talking to himself, it was actually directed to the person in the shadows behind him.

“My apologies. I was unable to retrieve Henriette...”

“It couldn't be helped. **Sacred Blaze** appeared, didn't he?”

“Still, I was unable to bring you **Second Last**'s head as well.”

The youth let out a burst of laughter. A surprised Shin looked on as the youth clutched his stomach, still laughing.

“It seems you still don't understand me fully. That was just a dramatic line, to screw around with Charlotte.”

“... Leaving aside whether or not you were joking when you said that, regarding Akabane’s head...”

“Of course, it would have been great if you did deliver to me. It would have been excellent material for use in Magic Arts. But that’s just the greedy part of me speaking.”

As usual, the youth was in high spirits, grinning broadly.

“Granville’s goal is to support the Kingsforts. However, our current goal would be to make your existence known to the higher ups in the academy. The scene is being set, all according to plan.”

“Attract the public’s attention, secure an escape route, and let the strong opponents gather...”

“Yes, exactly. On top of that, we have successfully exposed the Cathedral of Fools, which is most satisfactory. — Speaking of the Cathedral, how was the Magnus?”

“If I may offer a frank opinion, if he had six of those things with him, it would be beyond my ability to cope.”

“I thought as much!”

The youth happily clapped his hands together.

“Compile a report. It’s not every day you get to face a Squadron puppet one on one. We should tell papa about your invaluable personal experience. Also, the stuff about the Cathedral. The personal experience you underwent there is going to be really invaluable.”

“What do you mean by that? The investigation team went inside the Cathedral—“

“And they were all wiped out.”

“... Wiped out?”

“Periodic contact was to be made, but eventually it was lost permanently. The only one who made it back alive was you.”

Shin was dumbfounded. The youth laughed dubiously,

“It was overkill, really. Since it’s Walpurgis Academy’s Rutherford we’re talking about— also known as the strongest magus of the 19th century.”

“The time limit is about to expire. Do you think the T-Rex will be able to assassinate the headmaster?”

“If she did, that would be an interesting turn of events. But it’s impossible.”

“— I beg your pardon?”

“Magnus is currently accompanying the headmaster. There isn’t any chance of anyone assassinating the headmaster as things stand currently. Not even if you sent in a full division after him.”

“Then, why did you instigate Charlotte to kill him...?”

“Obviously, that was the Kingsforts’ suggestion. If all went swimmingly then good. But if she failed we would always toss the blame to us Granvilles as the scapegoat. Currently, the Kingsforts are trying to make a deal with the academy behind the scenes.”

“And... what is that pact?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Co-operating on research pertaining to God’s Simulacrum.”

“I... see...! And if a Granville butler were to appear then...!”

“It would sow doubt, which would lead to discord— and the deal would fall through. This is what the adults predict will happen. While what they want is no concern of mine, personally our interests coincide over having the deal fall through. After all, more than anything else, the thing that brings me most joy is—
”

Grinning cutely, a smile of an angel formed on his lips.

“Watching other people suffer misfortune.”

“You... really are rotten, to the core of your soul.”

“Thank you, Shin. Before I thoroughly enjoy myself punishing you, won’t you serve some black tea? It’ll get rid of my sleepiness.”

“As you wish.”

Shin respectfully bowed, before reaching for the teapot.

(3)

Just before dawn, a cold silence permeated the medical office.

Having finished surgery, Raishin wasn’t moved to the ward, but forced to sleep in the medical office.

He was barely breathing, looking more like he was dead rather than asleep.

Henri had a melancholic expression on her face as she sat by Raishin’s side, alone.

Raishin’s injuries were severe. His ribcage had been broken, and some of his organs were damaged.

Even so, Doctor Cruel had been unperturbed by the sight, going about the surgery indifferently. He opened Raishin up, set his broken rib cage back in place, stabilised his vitals, and finally sewed him back up. Although some people called him a quack doctor, the operation showed that rather surprisingly, he might actually have some skill. At the very least, he proved that he had nerves of steel.

The sounds of dogs barking in the distance could be heard, causing Henri to sit upright in shock.

“You... Really hate dogs, don’t you?”

Surprised, she turned to look at Raishin. His eyelids felt heavy as he opened them, staring up at the ceiling.

“Raishin— Did I wake you?”

“... It’s a little surprising, considering Charl likes dogs, you know?”

“I... don’t hate them. I like dogs.”

“... Then why are you so afraid of them?”

A gloomy expression overtook Henri, and she weakly muttered,

“Alfred... He was my sister’s favourite. When she went to boarding school, I told her I’d look after him, and she left him in my care...”

Her hands, which were resting on her lap, curled up into fists.

“It’s m-my fault. If only I could have control it properly... Then the p-prince... wouldn’t have ended up like that....”

Raishin let out a sigh he was unable to repress any longer.

He understood all too well. Henri didn’t hate dogs, but the memories that seeing dogs triggered. They were unpleasant, filled with a sense of failed responsibilities and regrets.

“... I’m sorry, Raishin.”

“Why are you apologising?”

“It’s my fault you’ve suffered those injuries. Because you came to save me...”

“I didn’t do anything. Loki’s the one who rescued you. However, this isn’t over just yet. The enemy will keep coming at us. The only way for Charl to be truly free is to kill every last one of them. At the very least, we have to force them to make a total withdrawal. Just keeping you away from your observer isn’t enough to stop Charl.”

A pitiful look formed on Henri's face as she fully understood the reality of their situation.

"... It's fine. It'll be dawn soon... and everything will be over."

"What... do you mean by that?"

"That was the deal that was agreed upon. If Charl can't complete her assignment by then, they'll... deal with us... so sis should be headed towards the headmaster now as we speak..."

The time limit was dawn.

Charl was going to keep trying till then!

"Why didn't you tell me that sooner!?"

Raishin forced his body into action, getting off the bed.

His face contorted in pain. His ribs had been barely reset into place after all.

"Wait... what are you doing!? Don't overexert yourself!"

"Yaya, where are you!?"

"Wait!"

Henri grabbed dazedly onto Raishin's arm.

Raishin turned his back on her in irritation, and Henri shouted at him with vigour.

"Kill me, please!"

"... What did you say?"

"My sister is a superb puppeteer, so she'll be able to escape them. If only I wasn't here to drag her do—"

“Don’t be ridiculous! Why do you think Charl is behaving like this in the first place!? She’s doing this because she wants you to live. Even you yourself said earlier that you’re scared of dying—“

“But I want to die now!”

Raishin fell silent. His silence gave Henri the strength to continue.

“I-I’ve... always... been jealous.”

While still gripping onto Raishin’s arm, Henri fervently confessed her true feelings to him.

“Charl is pretty, smart, and easily liked by everyone... but I... I’ve always been in her shadow, since I’m neither pretty nor smart... and I don’t have many friends...”

Tears began to fall one after another from her face.

“I... hated her. I told myself she was the one who caused the dissolution of the Belews, because of Alfred... I shifted the blame onto her... I’m such a vulgar girl... so... I deserve to die!”

“You’re wrong!”

Raishin’s voice was laced with fury, echoing from the bottom of his stomach. Henri was stupefied by his roar.

“Anyone would be jealous. However, is that really the sole emotion that defines you?”

“__“

“Do you really hate Charl, even now?”

“But... I’m a bad girl...”

“Don’t hide under that excuse! Face your true feelings!”

It was easier to think of herself as an evil beyond saving, or an existence that was better off disappearing. But Raishin wasn't having any of that.

“Don't look away now! Face it head on! Get a grip on how you truly feel!”

“I—“

“Say it! What do you want for Charl now!?”

“P-please...”

Henri trembled. She shuddered, knowing it was an irresponsible request, and yet she was unable to stop herself from saying what she really wanted to say.

“Save... my sister...!”

Henri shamefully and pathetically wept.

She was such a coward, being unable to do anything.

Without being able to offer any recompense, right now she was asking an absurd request from someone who was covered in wounds.

However, Raishin's eyes softened gently—

He nodded, like he was telling her to leave it to him.

As he dashed out of the medical office, all Henri could do was watch him go through tear stained eyes.

(4)

In the corridor just outside the medical office, Yaya was sitting dejectedly on a bench.

Making cute breathing noises next to her, Frey was hugging onto Rabi, sound asleep. She was waiting until the surgery was over, but consecutive Night Party appearances had probably tired her out.

Raishin came flying out from the medical office. Yaya had overheard the conversation he had with Henri. As she thought, Raishin was really intent on going.

Seeing her depressed like that, Raishin's face was the picture of concern as he approached her.

“What's the matter? Are you hurt?”

It was a superfluous question. Yaya grew even more dejected as she replied,

“... I'm sorry.”

“Even you? Why is everyone suddenly apologising for no good reason? Is this some kinda fad?”

“But there is a good reason! Yaya wasn't able to protect Raishin... and then you got those injuries...”

She had been worried and impatient all this time, but hadn't gone in. Perhaps she thought she had lost the right to, or that she wasn't qualified to stand by his side anymore.

Raishin gently rested his hand atop a crying Yaya's head.

“You idiot. That's my line. Your beautiful face was hurt, and all I could do was to look on helplessly.”

“Raishin...”

“Forgive me, Yaya. I'm always causing you nothing but grief.”

A warm feeling surged inside Yaya's chest.

She felt like she could do anything for him. Even something like making the impossible possible.

“However, we two grumbling idiots are going to go retrieve that scary dragoness.”

“But... what about Henri?”

While they were gone, who was to say the enemy wouldn't sneak in and kidnap her?

“Uu... Leave that to me.”

Yaya was startled by the sudden interruption.

They weren't sure when exactly she had woken up, but Frey was upright now, thumping her chest in confidence.

“Frey... are you sure you'll be ok?”

“Yes. *We* will stay by her side.”

“... Ok. I'll leave it in your hands then.”

She had emphasised the word ‘we’. Was she referring to the Garm type automata? Or perhaps...?

Raishin thought deeply about something, then he asked Frey a question.

“Hey. Can your dogs do something like this?”

While gesticulating, he inquired about their functions.

Listening to Raishin's plan, Frey nodded readily.

“Yes... They can.”

“Will they listen to my commands?”

“Riviera should be able to. She's smart and not afraid of strangers...”

“Then I can bring her along with me?”

“Uu... will you promise not to engage in bestiality?”

“Of course not! Just how badly perverted do you think I am!?”

Frey called her name, and a collie trotted out of the medical office.

While rubbing her head, Frey spoke to the dog. Although they weren't supposed to have intelligence, the collie seemed to understand what Frey was telling it, and eventually it looked up at Raishin, wagging its tail happily. It looked like she was willing to help them.

“Let's get along, Riviera. — Ok, time to go, Yaya!”

“Right!”

With Yaya and the collie in tow, Raishin dashed out of the entrance.

The darkness was faint. The literal early birds had begun to chirp. It was about to be dawn.

Amidst the morning mist, there was a shadow standing in front of them.

It was a woman who sparkled with the brilliance of the night stars. Her kimono clad figure was bewitching, and her eyepatch had its signature lens in it.

If this woman was to be his enemy, it would be a special case even for Yaya, who normally feared neither God nor Buddha.

“Shouko...”

Raishin's voice tensed up. Yaya came to a complete halt, and she stared apprehensively downwards.

Shouko was alone. Rather surprisingly, she hadn't brought along her usual bodyguard Irori, considering the time and place she was at now.

She had a white bottle of sake in her hand, and her face was slightly flushed.

Shouko chugged more sake, then wiped her lips with her wrist. It was an uncouth action befitting that of a ruffian, so watching Shouko do something like that was a disturbing sight.

However, he didn't have time to full take in what he just saw. Shouko smashed the bottle against floor, causing it to break into pieces.

The sharp crash caused Yaya and Riviera to stiffen involuntarily.

"I thought you were just ignorant, but I didn't think you were a fool, boy."

A ghastly silence descended. The cool air was cold to the point of being freezing. Riviera's tail drooped between her legs, and she began to whine pitifully.

"Do you want to know how to improve my mood?"

"... Yeah."

"I'm only going to say this once. The road lying before you forks into two paths, boy. You can either choose to return to bed now and go to sleep obediently, or I will put you to sleep myself."

"... Sorry, but I'll have to pass on both."

"You dare defy me?"

There was a glint in Shouko's eye. That alone was enough to send Yaya prostrating on the ground.

Raishin though, didn't show a hint of fear as he returned Shouko's glare.

"There is nothing worse in this world than vermin who bite the hand that feeds it."

"... I'm sorry."

"Yaya!"

Her name being called, Yaya cringed in fear.

Shouko's voice was quiet, but it left no room for debate.

“Come here.”

“B-but...”

“Now!”

Yaya's heart beat faster. She grew pale, and her legs seemed to lose strength.

She looked like she was about to collapse into a heap at any moment, but even then—

“I'm.... s-sorry... Shouko...”

Putting her heart and soul into it, Yaya mustered her willpower and managed to get out her words while trembling.

“But... Yaya... wants to be... Raishin's... strength...”

Anger began to build in Shouko's eye, accompanied by the sound of her geta hitting the ground.

Clack, clack. Shouko was approaching the pair and—

A brief moment later, Raishin's cheek swelled up.

“... Don't ever show your face to me again, boy.”

Yaya couldn't see what face Shouko had made as she said that.

Her hair fluttering in the wind, Shouko had turned her back on them and walked off. Raishin stood absolutely still, like a scarecrow, as Shouko's figure gradually melded into the mist and eventually disappeared.

“Raishin... Shouko... can be a little cold at times...”

Yaya gingerly tried to console the person she held dear.

“If it was something she had truly given up on, she wouldn’t go and do something like that...”

“... Yeah, I know.”

Raishin rubbed the part of his cheek that had been slapped, staring off into the mist as he spoke.

“After all, I would like to avoid making Shouko worry if I can help it. However, after seeing the plight of those two hopeless sisters, I can’t just abandon them now.”

“Raishin...”

“Now then, I suppose we can take things a bit easier.”

His white teeth flashing, Raishin grinned.

His smile seemed to ease the tension that Yaya was carrying, so Yaya was able to respond in her normal manner.

“How can you be so carefree even though you’ve just been scolded?”

“Compared to being scolded later, this is nothing. Now come on, the worst that can happen now is a scolding from a Shouko in a better mood, so we don’t have to hold back anymore!”

“— Right!”

Yaya made a heartfelt wish from the depths of her being.

I want to be his strength.

I want to be his shield and sword.

Her resolution embedded firmly in her heart, Yaya chased after Raishin, with Riviera in tow.

(5)

Blending into the night, a girl was controlling her breathing.

Straining her ears, she was trying to sense for any presence nearby. There were several men wriggling and squirming about in the surrounding darkness.

The security was severe. They were all skilled in detection, and it looked like they had started to search this area.

Rather unexpectedly, she was directly under a streetlamp, next to the paved road.

Hiding in the shadow of a large rock, light couldn't reach where she was. But at the same time, because it was so close to the light, the security personnel's eyes couldn't tell where the blind spot was. It made for a surprisingly good hiding spot.

She brushed her hair, slick with night dew, away in irritation. A bird— no, a dragon flew over to where she was, its wings not making a single sound.

It was Sigmund. He had been out on reconnaissance in his inconspicuous smaller drake form.

Charl whispered in a low voice, "What's the situation?"

"Hm. It's packed tightly with security guards from here to the headmaster's residence."

"... So we can't get any closer than this?"

"No. Besides, there's no light up ahead."

"If we get caught on purpose, there's a chance that they'll use their portable torchlights... but that's a pretty slim chance anyway. Ok, transform now, and we'll charge in from here."

She stood up, ready for action. Charl extended her right hand towards Sigmund.

However, Sigmund didn't move, remaining seated on the floor.

“Don't dilly-dally now. What's the matter?”

“It's not too late, even now. You should reconsider what you're about to do, Charl.”

Charl was flabbergasted, before raising her eyebrows in surprise.

“We've come all this way, what are you trying to say now?”

“Even if you succeed in killing the headmaster, there's no guarantee that they'll keep their word.”

“But if I defy them then they'll kill Henri for sure!”

“You can entrust Henri to Raishin— or even the academy. That would be one thing off your mind.”

“What good is a momentary reprieve!? Our enemy has the backing of MI5... there's nothing we can do about it!”

They stared at each other.

Seeing as their argument wasn't going anywhere, Sigmund changed the tone of his voice.

“Do you still remember? What you told me. If you really do like Raishin—“

“I don't.”

“Yes, yes, this is just hypothetical. Fictional. I'm just borrowing your words from then.”

With a flap of his wings, he flew up to her head, and continue speaking into her ear.

“You feared being labelled an easy woman.”

“... What about it?”

“It’s true that not much time has passed since you and Raishin first met. Up to that point, you were in love with Felix. But your feelings were just an illusion—maybe even something resembling adoration. You didn’t know the real Felix lurking on the inside, in fact you didn’t even know anything about Felix at all.”

Charl bit her lip, turning her face away in embarrassment.

“On the other hand, you came into contact with Raishin’s soul and it was relaxing. When your heart was broken and trampled upon, and the fear of loneliness overtook you, the one who rescued you from that was Raishin. Having said all this, wouldn’t it be natural for you to fall in love with him?”

“... That’s all circumstantial. Those are just convenient excuses to use if I wanted to feel that way.”

“But the fact that you want to feel that way, means that at the very least, you’ve acknowledged your feelings on a certain level—“

“I misspoke! It was a slip up! Don’t try to twist my words against me!”

Charl raised her voice involuntarily. Hurriedly clapping a hand over her mouth, her face turned red as she got mad.

“Really, why are you bringing this up now!? What does that have to do with anything!?”

“If you continue, you’ll never be able to go back to him again.”

“—!”

Sigmund’s words were like an iron stake through her heart.

“Your daily life wasn’t a cheerful one. You were a nuisance in the academy, and there was no one there who could ever understand you. And now you finally

found a friend who can empathise. At long last, you've become a normal human being. If you discard him, you're discarding your humanity— throwing away the happiness you've found with your own hands.”

It was a warning. Sigmund continued speaking in a very kind and detailed manner.

“You're about to kill someone you bear no ill-will against. That makes you no different from a common murderer. What will Raishin think of you then?”

Raishin had believed in Charl. He firmly believed that Charl wasn't the type of person who would commit murder.

But what Charl was about to do now...

“Even... if you tell me that now... It's... already too late!”

Charl unexpectedly raised her voice, tears streaming down her face.

“I destroyed the clock tower! I'm currently on the way to assassinate the headmaster... I'm now the academy's enemy. There isn't any place left for me to return to!”

Crouching down, she continued to sob silently. Unable to hold back the sobs, the tears leaked out and fell onto the grass.

“... I'm sorry. Forgive me, Charl.”

Sigmund hung his head dejectedly.

“My inadequacy is the cause for you having to walk down this road, and yet I've criticised you for it. If only I was stronger— enough strength to take on a nation's army, then I would be able to save you two. ”

“... That's not it. You've always been my strength when I've need you to be.”

Charl wiped the tears that were overflowing from her eyes, managing to choke out a few more words.

“Even now. Even when I’m hurt, depressed, and lost any chance of having a family to return to, you’re still here by my side... protecting me.”



She reached out for Sigmund and gently hugged him.

“Thank you for always being here for me.”

Hugging onto Sigmund, Charl began to cry again.

After she had calmed down, she wiped the last tear away and stood up.

“We can’t dilly-dally any longer. It’ll be dawn soon.”

“Yes. I don’t bear any personal grudge against the headmaster... but I have no choice.”

“If you don’t bear him any ill-will then don’t kill him.”

Sigmund flew up to Charl’s arm, readying himself for battle.

Somehow, someone had managed to get this close to them.

Had their voices been too loud? Had someone managed to figure out where they were?

It couldn’t be. He wasn’t someone with brains. It could just be a guess.

Knowing that her goal was the headmaster’s residence, it was easy to narrow down the closest route. On top of that, if he was sneaking around just as she did, it was only logical to end up in the same place as she was now.

Charl and Sigmund turned around to look up at the large rock at the same time.

As if his timing was deliberate, two shadows landed atop it at that exact moment.

A kimono clad girl, and a heavily bandaged patient.

“Yo, scary dragoness. I’m here to ask you out on a date.”

Of course, it was none other than Raishin.

(6)

The searing pain he was experiencing was torturous, but Raishin's facade betrayed none of it, masking the pain by forcing a laugh.

Cold sweat was pouring out of every pore, soaking his entire body.

Truthfully, he was feeling terrible. The night wind was taking its toll on his body, and there was little sensation in his hands and feet. The pain from his ribs was shooting all the way to the crown of his head, keeping his connection to consciousness tenuous at best.

Charl and Sigmund's killing intent was mixed with their magic energy, assailing him with full force.

Somehow managing to shrug it off, Raishin spoke to Charl.

"Stop acting like an idiot, and go back to the dorm. Have a good rest, you can even sleep in a little, then apologise sincerely to the board of directors and thoroughly explain the situation. Once you're done we can hit the town and celebrate in style."

"No. You'll stay within the academy grounds."

Yaya interjected. It hit Raishin then. With Sigmund and her around, it was going to get pretty noisy.

Hearing his ideal scenario unfold, Charl seemed to waver a little.

For a brief moment, the mask she was wearing cracked a little, and she looked like she was on the verge of crying.

Almost immediately though, the cold mask devoid of any emotion snapped back on.

"I refuse. And step aside. I'm going to kill the headmaster."

Raishin let out a huge sigh, then yelled in anger at her.

"You really are a big idiot! Do you plan on becoming a wanted criminal!?"

“Wha— Did you just call me an idiot? An idiot?! You don’t even understand people’s feelings! The one who calls someone an idiot is the bigger idiot, you pervert!”

“Shut up! Wasn’t there an important dream you had to fulfill?!”

Charl frowned, her lips forming an inverse ‘V’. The two of them glared at each other, sending sparks flying.

“This is the premier institute for magic arts— if you kill its headmaster, you’ll become the enemy of the entire magic world. And then the revival of the Belew household will become eternally impossible!”

“I know that! But I don’t have any other choice!”

Tears began to form at the edge of her eyes. However, before her emotions could break free and rampage wildly, Sigmund spread his wings, flying up to Raishin’s eye level.

His steel coloured scales glittered under the outside light.

As he fixated his red eyes on Raishin, Raishin felt a chill run down his spine. For that moment, he felt like this small dragon was more fearsome than any wild beast.

“Withdraw, Raishin. I don’t want your blood on my hands.”

“I’ll tell you this too. You’re not going to get rid of us that easily—“

A dense darkness began to overflow from Sigmund. It quickly enveloped the area around him. A burly leg extended out of the darkness, grasping firmly onto the ground.

What eventually emerged from the darkness was a dragon eight metres in length.

Looking at it from up close, this was truly a monster. Even elephants and giraffes were cute in comparison.

“I know you have hidden talent. But it’s pure hubris to think you can stand on par with a member of the Rounds just because you defeated Felix.”

His teeth looked like daggers, packed closely in rows inside a large, sturdy jaw. His deep voice reverberated from a mouth that looked like it could swallow

Raishin in a single gulp.



“You defeated a Cannibal Candy that was not at full strength. You caught him off-guard because of his overconfidence. Or have you forgotten how badly you fared against the Sword Emperor, Loki?”

His large face drew closer. If he were to bite now, Raishin would be severed into pieces almost too easily.

“You can never hope to understand the reason why Charl has to do what they say. No matter how skilled a puppeteer is, there is only so much he or she can hope to do alone—“

“You’re the one who doesn’t understand, Sigmund.”

With his body exposed to that huge jaw, Raishin replied in a level voice.

“I don’t care how strong you and Charl are, or how weak I am. I don’t care if my enemy is extremely strong, I will never use that as a reason to retreat.”

Extending his left hand towards Yaya, he began to temper magic energy inside his core.

“Also, there’s another reason— My partner is the strongest automaton in the world.”

The magic energy was transmitted. Yaya’s whole body overflowed with energy as the Kongouriki circuit activated.

Sigmund opened his large jaws, attempting to clamp down on Raishin.

Yaya promptly flew in between them, using both hands to press against his teeth. Yaya’s strength was currently tougher than steel itself. No matter how sharp the fangs, they wouldn’t be able to even scratch her.

Raishin jumped off from a rock, shouting as he did so.

“Yaya, get down!”

“Raster Canon!”

Light poured forth from Sigmund's throat upon Charl's command.

The torrent of light pierced the atmosphere. It grazed Yaya and annihilated the treetops behind her. If she had been standing where she was, she would have been vaporised instantly as well.

“Kouen Sanjuurokushou!”

“Ok!”

The moment she landed, Yaya took off again. Raishin's intent was transmitted via the thread of magic energy connecting them, guiding Yaya's limbs as the battle pattern they were going to use was conveyed to her. It wasn't an absolute command, but attuned Yaya to better understand Raishin's intentions, allowing for precise attacks.

Dodging Sigmund's fangs, she manoeuvred to his side and unleashed a kick at his abdomen.

Slipping past his claws, she leapt upwards and kicked Sigmund's back.

However, there was no dodging the next attack. His large tail caught Yaya in mid-air, sending her flying.

“Raster Flare!”

Charl leapt nimbly onto Sigmund's back, relentless continuing the attack.

Countless beams of light shot out of Sigmund's mouth, with each needle being deadly. Yaya tried to dodge in mid-air, but it was like trying to not get wet in the rain, and she was unable to evade the attack completely.

Yaya screamed in pain. With each needle of light piercing her, another part of her body split and broke off.

This was the power of the ultimate magic circuit, one that annihilated matter. Its destructive power was capable of inflicting damage to Yaya's body.

The Gram circuit, and by extension Sigmund, was a fearsome opponent.

Fighting at a distance was disadvantageous. He had to do something to get close...

“Suimei Sanjuuroku— no, Shijuuhachishou!”

Having received the instructions, Yaya dashed forward. While in the midst of her sprint she suddenly accelerated again, approaching Sigmund.

A flash of light was headed her way. Yaya dodged it quickly, but his forelegs were waiting for her.

He was going to crush her under his claws!

“Tenken!”

He changed the nature of magic he was using. Yaya planted her legs firmly into the ground, bracing herself for impact as Sigmund’s claws came crashing down on her.

“Push him off, Yaya!”

“Sigmund, resist her!”

Tinged with magic energy, Sigmund grew even larger.

As he mass grew before their eyes, Yaya feet began to sink into the ground.

Yaya was still enduring it though. If it came down to a contest of strength, she wouldn’t lose.

The battle was at a deadlock. In terms of positioning, Sigmund had the advantage, but his own forelegs were in the way so he couldn’t fire off a Raster Cannon. If he carelessly lifted his forelegs, he would be forced back by Yaya’s strength, and her next attack would be a fatal blow. Even Sigmund wouldn’t be able to walk away unscathed from an attack that destroyed Cannibal Candy.

At that moment, the surrounding undergrowth rustled with movement, and something came flying out.

It was a monkey-like figure clad in helmet and armour. It was the security personnel's Heimguarders!

He counted three of them. Considering their fight had been loud and flashy, it was obvious that they would be discovered.

"Support him!" "Leave it to us!" "Surrender, you fiend!"

"You're in the way!"

Charl screamed, firing off the Raster Cannon.

Large trees, swathes of grass, as well as the Heimguarders were caught in the blast.

The panicked security personnel fired at Charl. Raishin's gut turned cold— but Sigmund used his wings to block the bullets, causing sparks to fly as the shots ricocheted away.

Sigmund turned his head towards them, the depths of this throat glowing with light.

"Charl, stop!"

Raishin hurriedly threw himself in the way, covering the guards.

"You guys get away as well! I'll do something about this!"

Their puppets were already broken, so the security guards promptly followed his orders and retreated.

Feeling slightly relieved, Raishin turned to face Charl, who was still on Sigmund's back.

“Come to your senses already, you crazy dragoness! You’re targeting the wrong people! If you have that much power, why aren’t you fighting the real enemies!?”

“Are you an idiot!? Obviously it’s because the enemy is so much stronger!”

“If that’s the case, get help! Ask someone! Ask me!”

“Trust me! Trust the academy! The association! Rely on others!”

“Wha— Don’t go spouting off nonsense so causally!”

The enemy was certainly formidable. As an ally of the Kingsforts, their strength might even rival that of a nation. Furthermore their roots were sunk firmly in the inner workings of the academy.

Even with Raishin’s help, it wouldn’t be enough. There was no way the academy would ever help them. There was also no grounds for the mages association to believe Charl’s story.

There was no way they could ever hope to take on the world.

However— Sigmund’s body violently shook as it was lifted into the air.

In response to Raishin’s determination, strength was building up inside Yaya!

“Just stop bothering about me already!”

Charl was visibly shaken, her voice cracking with sorrow.

“I want this! I can’t go back anymore! I destroyed the clock tower and assaulted the headmaster! I’m the academy’s enemy now! There’s no one who can protect us now—“

“Let’s go back, Charl!”

Charl was transfixed by Raishin’s gaze.

The strength of it caused Charl to shiver in fear.

“But...! I’ll... only... be a hindrance to you...!”

“You can hinder me—“

From deep within Raishin’s body, from the primordial essence of his soul, an extraordinary amount of magic energy began to gush forth.

“—for as long as you want to!”

With a roar, Yaya’s strength began to swell up.

Sigmund’s body was as large and heavy as a battleship, but now Yaya was lifting him up into the air, and threw him away.

Sigmund flew through the air, landing several metres away.

There was a dreadful reverberation in the ground, as Sigmund somehow contrived to land on his feet.

Luckily, it looked like Charl hadn’t been hurt. She was clinging tightly onto one of Sigmund’s wings.

Sigmund raised his head, but Raishin had already begun to move.

“Suimei Shijuuhachishou!”

Holding onto Yaya’s back, they charged towards Sigmund.

Charl was screaming in tears as she fired off wildly.

Each shot hadn’t been full charged as they were fired in rapid succession. Having to do so seemed to be taking a heavy toll on Sigmund. The power of each shot was visibly weakening and the light was getting thinner.

Seizing advantage of that chance, Yaya charged forward. Only fifty metres separated them. Sigmund was right in front of her!

Sigmund's claws came slashing from the side. Yaya blocked it, and held him off. In the brief moment they were both immobilised, Raishin jumped off Yaya's shoulder, leaping towards Charl.

For that moment, he was completely exposed in front of Sigmund's large jaws.

Charl began to temper her magic energy— but faltered halfway.

Taking advantage of her hesitation, Raishin's hand managed to reach her.

Grabbing onto her, the two of them tumbled off Sigmund's back, crashing down onto the thicket below.

“Guah!”

Raishin groaned. Sandwiched between Charl and the ground, he could feel his ribs screaming in pain.

“Eh... Hang on, are you ok?”

Charl got off Raishin hurriedly, gently prodding his abdomen.

“What's this... it's warm... and sticky...!”

His stomach felt soft and spongy, and something like water was building up under the skin.

Raishin was haemorrhaging internally. Or maybe it was an inflammation. Either way, this wasn't normal.

Her earlier bravado vanished completely as she was completely flustered now.

“W-w-we have to seek medical attention quickly. If we don't, you'll...!”

“There will be no need for that.”

A shadow unexpectedly appeared, directing hostile intent at the both of them.

Sigmund and Yaya came flying over, standing in front of their respective masters to protect them.

There was someone standing on top of a branch on a nearby tree.

Suddenly they were aware of their strange environment. At some unknown point in time, the presence of all nearby security personnel had disappeared.

Had someone silenced them?

Was it the person in front of them who had done so?

The person on the tree branch was none other than the person who had introduced himself as the Granville butler, Shin.

“I find it strange you’re talking about medical attention. Shouldn’t you be leaving him here and heading to the headmaster’s residence?”

“... I don’t feel like doing that anymore.”

“That is rather unfortunate. Are you still conscious, Mister Akabane?”

In place of a reply, Raishin stood on his feet.

“As a butler of the Granville household, I dislike conflict. Settling disputes with a fistfight is an antiquated and primitive notion. In lieu of that, I would prefer if we discussed things like gentlemen.”

Shin adopted an extremely formal, business-like tone as he made his proposal.

“Will you not put up any resistance as I kill you?”

Chapter 7 – The Dancing, Smiling, Deceitful Elf

(1)

“The road lying before you forks into two paths, boy. You can either choose to freeze to death here, or you can—“

Two years ago, Shouko faced a blood soaked Raishin as she gave him a choice.

“Throw yourself in battle against Akabane Tenzen, and perish if you lose to him.”

Lying flat on his back, Raishin stared at Shouko after a moment.

The edge of his mouth was caked with blood and his body was gaunt and haggard, but he hadn't lost the sparkle in his eyes.

“... You'll let me get a shot at him?”

“If that is what you wish.”

Raishin stared up at the girl— Yaya, who was standing next to Shouko.

“... yours.”

At first it was faint, but the next time he said it clearly.

“I'll become yours.”

“Clever boy. Well then, let us make a wager.”

“Wager...?”

“I, the great Karyuusai— revere neither God nor Buddha. However, I am not the Devil. All I am giving you is the possibility, boy. Whether or not you go on to live to a ripe old age is entirely up to you.”

“What... do you mean?”

“If you defeat Akabane Tenzen, fine. If you are unable to however, your body is mine, boy.”

The colour of Raishin's face changed.

What was racing through his mind was in all probability, the image of his sister with the contents of her body removed.

Was Shouko going to do the same to him?

“Why... us...!?”

“I need living Kuretsuba’s Blood, in order to fulfil my own desires.”

A torrent of anger built up inside his eyes. Raishin stared at Shouko, before spitting out his words.

“I got it... If you’re fine with this body, you can have it!”

Amidst the falling snow, the two of them sealed their contract with each other.

“Mistress...”

Shouko lifted her head vacantly. Her elbow was numb from resting on the armrest for too long.

Was it because she was tipsy? She had let her mind wander off without realising it.

They were inside a mansion the military had procured. Sakura trees had been imported, but their petals had begun to scatter as they were just past their peak, so the flowers themselves were pretty sparse. Shouko laid out a blanket underneath the miserable branches, treating herself to a mini flower viewing. Irori and Komurasaki were beside her.

The cup in Shouko’s hand was empty. She held it out towards Irori.

“You’ve drank enough. Please refrain from drinking any further.”

For Irori to defy her was a rare sight. Upon closer inspection, it looked like Komurasaki was also looking at her with a worried expression on her face.

Shouko laughed in self-depreciation. She wasn’t behaving like herself, and now she had caused concern for these two.

“Mistress. What were you thinking about?”

“... I was thinking about the boy. That incorrigible brat. Even though he said he’d become mine, he always does whatever he wants to.”

Irori and Komurasaki glanced at each other, before letting out a giggle together.

“What is so funny?”

“My apologies... But mistress, we weren’t expecting you to grumble like so. Especially since you’re the one who knows Raishin’s nature the best.”

“Hmph... you’re pretty calm, all things considered. For one, you’re usually causing a racket over Yaya.”

“I d-don’t do that at all!”

Irori’s white skin turned red. Coughing in embarrassment, she turned to look at Komurasaki.

“As long as she’s by Raishin’s side, she’ll be fine. That’s what Komurasaki said— and what I believe in as well.”

She glanced over in the direction of the academy. The wide sky on the other side of the fence had begun to take on a faint tinge of blue.

“... You’re right. Yaya will be fine. She’ll feed off the boy, and slowly get closer...”

Puzzled, Komurasaki tilted her head slightly. Next to her, Irori’s shoulders stiffened.

“I’m sure that person’s dream will be fulfilled as well.”

Shouko looked up at the sky, her gaze lying beyond some horizon far off in the distance.

Dawn had finally broken.

(2)

“I refuse.”

As soon as the words left his lips, Shin vanished from the trees.

In her panicked state, Charl couldn't track his movements. Raishin had to throw himself at her, shoving the both of them out of the way of an oncoming kick.

Sigmund moved to rip him apart with his claws, but Shin smoothly slipped past him, ignoring Sigmund to chase down Raishin once again.

Hopping straight up into the air, he came down immediately with a heel drop. It was an impossible trajectory that ignored inertia. Raishin's movements were dulled. He couldn't react in time!

“Raishin!”

But Yaya could. Sliding between them, she fended off the blow.

Shin leapt backwards in retreat— before flipping the laws of physics the middle finger by changing his vector mid jump with not a single damn given towards inertia. It was a feint!

“Shinkan Shijuuhachishou!”

Yaya shifted into a relaxed stance, waiting for the opponent's attack to land.

It was a stance ready to catch whatever attack was coming. But Shin's leg stopped midway.

Her timing being thrown off, Yaya twitched instinctively. At that moment, his leg reached maximum acceleration again in an instant. Yaya was sent flying by his kick, leaving Raishin completely defenceless.

Charl didn't even have time to step in. Sigmund's large size was unfortunate as it meant he couldn't keep up with the high speed action taking place. This time, in front of their bewildered eyes, Shin's foot connected squarely with Raishin's head.

Raishin was blown away. His forehead was cut open, blood flying everywhere. His skull might have been broken as well.

Raishin flopped lifelessly onto the pavement stones, not moving an inch.

A relaxed Shin turned slowly to face Charl.

“Now then, it’s your turn—“

Yaya’s boots crashed into the back of Shin’s head, cutting him off.

(— No way!?)

Charl stared in amazement. Shin hadn’t been fazed by Yaya’s surprised attack at all.

In fact, Yaya seemed to be the one who was worse off after that exchange. After landing, Yaya gingerly hopped on one foot, lightly shaking her other foot in concern.

Raishin stood up behind her, shoulders heaving with every breath he took.

Thanks to being kicked in the head, he was unsteady on his feet. Still, the sharpness in his eyes hadn’t dulled at all.

“Charl...”

Sigmund whispered in a low voice. Charl was startled back to her senses.

“Raster Cannon!”

After a moment of charging, a flash of light erupted.

She aimed for the space where Shin occupied, but he took to the air, evading the line of fire.

She wasn’t going to let him escape that easily. Once again, Charl fired off a well-directed blast.

This Raster Cannon was accurate enough to knock down a bird in mid-flight. Surely this would hit!

The stream of light definitely hit Shin. However, with a loud, flashy sound, the stream of light suddenly veered away, flying off in a different direction.

(He repelled it!?)

The magic circuit Gram was a secret technology that was closely related to how the universe worked. Not matter how tough the recipient was, anything with form was instantly obliterated. Even so, why...?

Straining her eyes in the darkness, she could see that Shin's hand was inflamed, and some parts of it had been burnt and flaked away.

He hadn't escaped totally unscathed, but it was far from being a fatal injury.

In all likelihood, the magic circuit he was equipped with was something that was closely related to how the universe worked as well.

It wasn't the time to be surprised though. Shin swooped down like a swallow, unleashing a kick to the side of Sigmund's face. His giant body staggered, before collapsing again.

Yaya followed through with a second assault, but Shin was too quick for her, blowing her away with another kick.

His strength wasn't a joke.

Shaking away the discomposure that was dominating her brain right now, Charl somehow managed to calm herself down.

And then, realising something, she started looking around at their surroundings.

"It's useless, Miss Belew. You're not going to find what you're looking for."

"... But that's impossible."

Shin sighed patronisingly. His attitude was irritating her.

“No matter how elaborate an automaton is, there is one thing which distinguishes them from humans.”

That was stating the obvious. Humans and puppets were different. A puppet—

“Indeed. An automaton cannot generate magic energy.”

This applied to Bandolls as well. Any magic energy they generated was not from their puppet mechanisms, but the human parts that were integrated inside them.

“So why then, am I able to fight all alone?”

“... Don’t make me laugh. Are you seriously still insisting you’re fighting by yourself?”

“I may be skilled at being the butler of the Graville family, but if I had to name a flaw, it would be my propensity to leak secrets. Allow me to elucidate you. What is standing before you— What I am is—“

Putting his hand on his chest, he bowed respectfully.

“*Deus Machina*— Machine Doll.”

(3)

Inside the corridor of the medical faculty, Frey was sitting on a bench spacing out.

Inside the office, the twelve Garm automata were keeping an eye on Henri.

Being bad with dogs, and now surrounded by them, Henri was trembling like a small animal. Having been herded up onto a simple bed, a cornered Henri had no intention of escaping. As the Garm automata had sharp senses and vigilance was their forte, they would be able to sense any enemy coming easily. With that level of assurance, Frey had allowed herself to drift off.

Frey was hugging onto Rabi, when suddenly, his ears perked up.

Rubbing her eyes, Frey peeked into the office— then suddenly bolted upright.

Henri had a scalpel to her wrist, and she was about to slice her own artery!

“Robin!”

She shouted through the doorway. The dachshund leapt into action, biting down on Henri’s right hand.

The pain caused Henri to drop the scalpel. Her left wrist had narrowly avoided harm by a hair’s breadth.

Frey trotted over to Henri and picked up the scalpel.

Thinking she was about to be scolded, Henri pulled down her hat, hiding behind it.

“Please... Just leave me alone! There’s no point in someone like me living on!”

“If you died, I wouldn’t care.”

“— Then why!? Don’t stop me!”

“But Raishin would be sad.”

Henri’s head sank as she bit her lip. Frey continued on.

“The T-Rex... did a bad thing. But she did it because... she wanted you to live.”

Frey’s words pierced Henri. Her shoulders drooped and she cast her eyes downwards.

“Raishin... also said something like that...”

“Then you should understand, right?”

“But... I can’t undo all the bad things that have happened. Even if someone like me continues to live, sis will... not to mention, I caused Raishin to be grievously injured...”

“The T-Rex— Charlotte told me everything.”

“—!”

“I know. I know that you two are being coerced by someone else...”

It was yesterday evening. When Charl appeared in front of Frey, she had laid bare the truth of the matter before her.

“Why... are you telling me this?”

As she asked that, Charl seemed to blush on the inside, turning her head away.

“If it’s that idiot alone, then he’ll somehow manage on his own. But if you’re going to butt in too, then I’m afraid you’ll end up hurting yourself.”

Having said so, there was an imploring look the way Charl was looking at Frey.

“Don’t tell that idiot though. You absolutely cannot. It might be person hubris— No, it’s not hubris. Even if it wasn’t me in this situation, he would definitely rush in to help.”

“If that’s the case...”

“That’s exactly why I don’t want him to know. I’m not going to, and I don’t want you to either.”

It’s a promise, Charl reminded her and Frey nodded instinctively in assent.

To be quite honest, she didn’t really understand what Charl had just said.

“But now I do. Raishin is the sort of person who will fight on, even if he’s battered and bloody. He’s not the sort to abandon people.”

Henri looked up at her. Frey was admonishing her.

“If he comes to help, you would end up becoming reliant on him... and that’s no good.”

Raishin would bet his life.

Raishin would fight the world.

Without giving any consideration for his own body, he would suffer injury after injury.

Which was why she shouldn’t get him involved. If she really wanted him to be safe, then—

“That’s why... You shouldn’t be so dependent on him too.”

She smiled gently.

Would her words alone really be enough to stop Henri?

Henri lay face down on the bed, withdrawing into silence like a shellfish.

Suddenly, the dogs turned to face the window in unison.

It was a bit slow, but Frey’s hearing managed to catch the disturbance as well.

There was a bright flash outside the window. Frey activated Rabi’s Sonic circuit at once, funnelling the harsh sound of the battle raging outside into the room.

Intuitively, she knew Raishin was struggling. She grew fidgety and impatient, before declaring out,

“I’m leaving the dogs here. Loki is also here, so you’ll be safe.”

Bringing only Rabi, she turned and made for the door.

“Eh... where are you going?”

“To where Raishin is. When push comes to shove, I want to be able to help.”

Mounting Rabi, Frey thought for a moment, before tilting her head slightly.

“... Do you want to come along?”

(4)

And that was how Henri came to be hiding in the shadow of the trees, watching over the battle.

Frey was next to her. Rabi’s Sonic circuit hid any sounds they made, and thanks to that the enemy hadn’t noticed their presence.

Shin was all by himself. He was perched in mid-air, like there was some sort of invisible foothold there, looking down upon an impatient Charl and a battered Raishin.

“... Machine Doll?”

Raishin repeated what Shin had just said.

It wasn’t something he had heard of before. Henri too, was hearing such a thing for the first time.

On the other hand, Frey seemed to have understood the implications. Henri heard a sharp intake of breath come from her.

“... What the heck is that? Are you not an automaton?”

“You lack knowledge, Mister Akabane. As a student of this academy that is simply unacceptable. Isn’t that right, young mistress of the Belew house?”

“... A perfect doll. In other words, he is completely autonomous.”

She didn’t really understand what her sister had said, but there was one thing Henri was clear about.

That was the reason why there wasn't a puppeteer nearby and the reason why Shin could use magic arts.

If he was just a Bandoll it still wouldn't be able to account for everything; he could use magic arts limitlessly. The mechanics behind a Machine Doll was the reason for Shin's abilities.

Shin theatrically nodded, confirming what Charl had said.

"A machine, but also a doll. Such a fusion represents the simulacrum which God created in His own likeness— in other words a human being."

A mechanical human— that was what a Machine Doll was.

Raishin knitted his brows together in displeasure.

"I don't get it. So what if you are that thing you say you are?"

"My apologies. I may be skilled at being the butler of the Granville family, but if I had to name a flaw—"

"You give the most roundabout explanations ever."

"Indeed. Put simply, as I am a perfect individual— imperfect existences such as yourselves cannot possibly ever hope to achieve victory."

Shin began his attack again.

His after-image trailing behind like the tail of a comet, Shin flew through the air like a bolt of lightning.

Turning at perpendicular angles, he zig-zagged past Raishin and Yaya, heading for Charl.

Sigmund sensed the danger, using his tail in an attempt to swat Shin away.

However, Shin turned at an impossible angle, smoothly dodging Sigmund's tail. Without losing any speed at all, he charged straight towards Sigmund's body, unleashing a kick.

His foot sunk into Sigmund's flank, the explosive force lifting his enormous body into the air.

“Bastard!”

At Raishin's shout, Yaya charged towards Shin. Although she was as agile as a wildcat, Shin effortlessly dodged all her attacks as easily as though they were leaves fluttering in the wind, taking to the sky to escape again.

A faint light trickled out, and ever so slightly, Sigmund shrank in size.

“Sigmund! Are you ok?”

“Hmph... It's not a cause for concern.”

He was lying. Sigmund was now the size of a horse. It was going to be hard for Charl to ride him now. She grimaced.

“... This is disgraceful.”

Charl had moved past being vexed and was being refreshingly candid about their situation.

“This is humiliating. Extremely humiliating. Even though there are two— four of us and one of him, we haven't been able to land a single scratch at all.”

“... Can you continue?”

“Thanks to some pervert who forced us to go all out excessively, my magic energy is almost at its limit.”

“Sorry about that. Don't you have some sort of trump card?”

“Are you an idiot? Did your brain die back there? With no magic energy, a trump card is worth jack shit!”

“A lady from a noble family shouldn’t be using the word shit.”

“What about you then? Don’t you have some crafty plan up your sleeve?”

“Nope.”

Charl’s jaw dropped. It seemed like she had expected the complete opposite.

“I don’t have a grasp on his magic art. Plus he said he was a Machine Doll, which is something I’ve never heard of before. If we want to take him down, we can’t rely on petty tricks. It has to be brute force... but if he dodges the blow, then no matter how much trouble we go through to attack him he’ll avoid taking any damage—“

There was a glint in Raishin’s eye. It looked like he had thought of something.

“Hm. If I told you all we need is one shot from Sigmund, do you think you can pull it off?”

Charl digested Raishin’s words, before letting out a short laugh.

“Don’t worry about it, our one shot is enough to evaporate the clock tower.”

“Perfect. Don’t screw up!”

“Same to you!”

The two of them split left and right. Henri had no idea what just transpired, but at the very least she understood they were cooperating. The both of them had come to some sort of mutual understanding, and they seemed to be putting some sort of plan into action.

Raishin and Yaya were the vanguard, charging right in front of Shin.

Extending the palm of his hand towards Yaya, Raishin transmitted a large amount of magic energy over to her.

Yaya's entire body began to overflow with the energy streaming into her. She was about to do something. Shin abruptly changed directions, heading towards Yaya to cut her off before she could do anything.

Moving faster than the naked eye could follow, Shin disappeared amongst a series of bewildering turns.

An instant later, he was right behind Raishin's back—

And he came to a complete halt.

Someone had grabbed onto Shin's body, locking his movements!

Yaya had thrust herself between Raishin and Shin, sealing his movements.

A flood of relief washed over Henri as she realised Raishin wasn't going to die, but at the same time there were doubts surfacing inside her mind.

Shin's speed and trajectories should have been beyond Raishin's ability to follow.

In that case, for him to move Yaya where she was now, was that a... prediction?

Had he sent Yaya in front, exposing his back... on purpose?

If Shin had charged headlong into a frontal assault, Raishin would have been dead for sure.

It was such a dangerous gamble. What a display of bravery!

“As much as I hate imitating Loki, getting the desired result is more important.”

“... How can you call this a desired result, Mister Akabane?”

Shin coolly spoke. While he and Yaya were locked in a contest of strength,

“My body is able to withstand even the Gram circuit. No matter how much strength your puppet might possess, you will not be able to land even a scratch on me. Something like that should have been obvious to—“

“You said it yourself.”

“What...?”

“I don’t really know what a Machine Doll is, but you’re not completely perfect.”

Raishin let out a deep breath— and an instant later, he began summoning an enormous amount of magic energy.

“Kouen Zesshou—“

The energy flowed into Yaya, causing her to shine with a fierce bluish-white light.

“Midare Yozakura”

The next moment, Yaya burst into action.

It looked like she was a human bullet. Her fists and feet were unleashed repeatedly at high speeds.

It was like a storm. Or watching a machine gun fire.

Shin couldn’t move at all. At his slightest twitch Yaya immediately tracked him and pounded him back. Shin body was hit repeatedly by blows which carried the force of a bullet.

However, none of the blows broke his skin. Yaya’s attack, fierce as it was, appeared to be too light against him.

Even so, Raishin didn’t let up. He was as intense as fireworks exploding, straining his entire body into channeling magic energy as he continued to determinedly control Yaya’s movements.

Finally, for a brief moment.

A crimson droplet flew out of the arm Shin had been using to guard.

The number of droplets began to visibly increase, flying lightly out into the air.

Shin's skin had been broken, his flesh was tearing, his wounds were beginning to increase.

The blood spray danced wildly in the air. It was like watching cherry blossoms in a blizzard.

However, Yaya's onslaught ended there.

Like a well that ran dry, strength left Raishin's body as his output of magic energy shut off.

Wobbling on his feet, Raishin fell prostrate onto the ground. At the same time Yaya's movements grew duller, and she fell onto her bottom.

Raishin was out of magic energy! The two of them could no longer fight on!

It was a complete reversal of fortune. Shin was going to obliterate them— or so she thought.

Shin had fallen onto his knees, collapsing onto the ground.

He was breathing wildly. His whole body was covered in blood. Flaps of his clothing were dangling languidly from his person, or maybe it was his skin. At any rate, Henri couldn't see Shin getting to his feet any time soon.

“If you think about it, it's only logical. Why would someone who could easily take a blow choose to dodge Yaya's attack? Obviously, there was a disadvantage to taking the hits.”

Raishin groaned as he weakly muttered.

“It’s the same reason as Yaya being exhausted... I don’t care if you’re a Machine Doll or whatever, but as long as you’re on a level of a living thing— using magic energy wears you out.”

I see, thought Henri.

Shin’s defence, speed, and attack were all powered by the same magic art. It was a magic art that let him control his body down to a molecular level.

Preventing damage, flying freely through the air, all these were thanks to his magic art.

Once he understood the unique mechanism of how it worked, he wasn’t able to formulate a counter to it.

And it was precisely because he didn’t have a counter-plan for it that he chose to fight him head on, an inefficient but reliable course of action.

In short, his aim was to exhaust his opponent’s magic energy by thoroughly hitting Shin with the blows he loathed so much. It was a battle of attrition. In a one on one scenario it would be an indecisive battle with no clear victor. But now...

“Charl, now!”

The Raster Cannon would surely hit an immobile Shin!

Charl had already finished charging up her magic energy. Her hand resting on Sigmund’s back, she was ready to fire at any time. Drops of flaming light were dripping out of Sigmund’s mouth—

But she didn’t shoot.

The expression on Charl’s face froze as she stiffened up.

It was because her opponent had the form of a human. Even though she had every right to hate him after what he had done to her and Henri.

“Charl! Fire!”

Charl closed her eyes, pulling the trigger. The blast of light finally surged forward.

Shin suddenly stood upright, dodging the stream of light in one smooth movement.

At first she thought Shin was moving on some sort of reserve power, but that wasn't it. Even though she could never hope to reach her sister's level as a magician, Henri was still able to detect a 'thread' floating in the air.

Someone had attached a thread of magic energy to Shin.

A puppeteer— but where!?

She stood up without thinking, scanning the area with her eyes. Frey restlessly search their surroundings as well. The first to move though, was Raishin. Drawing painful breaths, he shouted out with all his strength.

“Riviera!”

Just as Henri was wondering who that was, there was a bark.

It was a dog. Its voice was laced with magic energy, flying towards the undergrowth like a bullet. An invisible ball that ripped the atmosphere apart. It flew past the treetops, splitting a few branches on its way up.

Next to the road, on the very top of a streetlight, there was a youth sitting there.

Just before the sonic bullet reached him, he lightly kicked off the light, jumping down to avoid it.

However— before he could land, Raishin intercepted him.

Grappling the youth, in one swift motion Raishin pinned him against the streetlight whilst drawing a knife to his throat.

With his knife at the youth's throat, Raishin braced himself. If he saw the slightest movement from the youth, Raishin would slash without hesitation. With this he couldn't put up any resistance, let alone control Shin.

Speaking of Shin.

It had happened at some point in time earlier, but now Yaya had him with both arms pinned behind his back.

Charl was dumbfounded. The same went for Henri and probably Frey as well. They still couldn't comprehend what Raishin had done.

The one thing they were clear about was that Raishin had drawn out the enemy.

However, even though he had been drawn out, the youth was contrarily happy.

"I must say I'm surprised! How did you know where I was— how did you even know I existed?"

Henri was also confounded. Even if the dog was responsible for discovering his location, how did Raishin know he was even here in the first place?

"... It's true I lack knowledge. Quite frankly, whatever that butler is... is beyond my understanding."

"And?"

"So I thought about what I did know... I thought along the lines that he was an automaton."

"That was a pretty educated guess! You were half-right about that."

The youth laughed. Even though he was in a precarious situation, he didn't show an ounce of fear.

"Please, continue. So what if Shin was an automaton?"

“He said he didn’t need a puppeteer. If that was the case, I decided to create a scenario where he would need one.”

And once he did so, the puppeteer would be forced to show himself.

In that case, back then when Raishin had appeared to run out of magic energy.

When it seemed like their plan had been realised successfully.

Everything was all within Raishin’s calculations—

It was a trap designed to lure the puppet master behind the whole affair into the open!

A gruesome smile etched itself onto Raishin’s face as he pressed the blade against the youth’s throat.

“Come along now, executive committee chairman Cedric Granville. First I’ll have you spill the whole story, then later I’ll spill some of your blood.”

The youth started blinkly rapidly, before bursting into—

—laughter. It was a bright, cheerful laugh that showed he was enjoying himself, a laugh that did not fit the situation he was in currently.

“It might be true that you lack knowledge. But I’ll say this. You are a sharp one. You’ve exceeded my expectations twice or thrice now. But if you think this is checkmate, then—“

The youth’s figure vanished.

It was different from Shin. He disappeared from sight, like he had simply melted away.

“Raishin! Behind you!”

Yaya shouted. Henri was slow to realise where he was.

The youth's figure had disappeared from Raishin's front— and now was standing behind him.

“You were just one move short.”

Raishin hurriedly swung his elbow backwards. However, it was a futile gesture as he slashed the air harmlessly. The youth disappeared once again, and an instant later, he had transformed into Shin.

Or did he perform a substitution? Or had they switched places?

In any case, the youth had vanished, and Shin had escaped Yaya's clutches.

While he was still bewildered by the sudden turn of events, Shin's leg buried itself into Raishin's side.

There was a horrible sound on impact, and Raishin was sent tumbling onto the grass.

Yaya and Charl, as well as Henri, cried out in unison. Unexpectedly, the only one amongst them who had an astute reaction was Frey.

Sending Rabi out, Frey directed him towards Shin. His sharp fangs bearing down on Shin's throat, just as he was about to clamp his jaws on Shin's neck, Shin dropped downwards sharply, dodging Rabi's charge.

Like earlier, the youth suddenly appeared atop Shin's shoulder.

It was like a scene out of a dream. Or perhaps it was some form of illusion.

The youth looked down upon the fallen Raishin, giving him a bright and cheerful grin.

Shin rose up further into the sky, and the two of them flew off towards an unknown location.

All too quickly, the silence of night returned.

(5)

“Did you overdo it a little back there? I’d prefer it if you didn’t die on me now.”

Sitting atop his shoulders, his master was making what seemed like a worried comment.

Even as he said it though, he was smiling. Contrary to his words, there was no trace of unhappiness anywhere.

Flying silently through the grove of trees, Shin hung his head.

“My deepest apologies. I... made a grave miscalculation.”

“What are you apologising for now?”

“Such a failure is the worst kind of display for your intended demonstration.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Even without the assistance of a puppeteer, you were able to dominate two mages who were Rounds calibre. You’ve sufficiently proved the quality of a Machine Doll.”

His master chuckled, clearly in a good mood.

“I feel great. You might even say I’m in high spirits. I’ve found a new toy to play with after all. He is magnificent. I will enjoy making him dance in the palm of my hand.”

“I may be skilled at being the butler of the *Bernstein* family... but if I had to name a flaw, it would be my cowardice.”

“What are you afraid of, Shin?”

“My lady, that youth will one day fly out of your palm... is what I fear.”

“You don’t get it. Isn’t that precisely why he’s so fascinating?”

His mistress didn't have a care in the world. Nevertheless, the look in her eyes was that of one who hungered for destruction.

"I think, from now on, the Night Party is going to become more enjoyable."

"The Night Party... Are you thinking of yet another malicious plan?"

"Why do you think I entered at the 87th seat, such a horrible number? I, Alice Bernstein— **Elf Speeder**—"

"Will play with you again on the stage of the Night Party. Look forward to it, Oriental Machine Doll and Mister puppeteer."

The figure of Shin's mistress was now a beautiful girl with silver hair.

As her long hair unravelled, it fluttered and flowed in the night air like a shooting star.

The two leapt from tree to tree, disappearing into the forest lit by morning's glow.

(6)

The moment the fight was over, Henri slumped onto the floor.

Her strength had completely left her body. Even though she knew it was still too soon to feel relieved, a heavy sense of fatigue overwhelmed her. The night was so quiet it hurt the ears— but just as she thought so,

"Raishin! Are you ok?!"

The silence was rapidly shattered by Yaya.

Glancing over, she saw Raishin lying down on the ground, not moving at all.

It was a perilous situation. Before Henri could even stand on her feet, Charl had already dashed over to him. Standing behind a sobbing Yaya, Charl timidly asked,

“Well... Are you still alive?”

Straining her ears, a voice barely louder than a mosquito's buzzing could be heard.

“... Somehow... I guess.”

“H-hmph. It's not like I was particularly concerned or anything. Since you're just a pervert whose only redeeming feature is your toughness.”

Henri let out a sigh of relief, the tension beginning to dissipate.

Frey pushed Henri forward, pointing to Charl. Telling her “Go on.”, Frey gave a further push to get Henri moving. Although it was the last thing Henri wanted to do at the moment, she couldn't refuse, and so Henri timidly walked out towards her sister.

“Sis...”

Her voice was laced with hesitation. Charl had already noticed her presence, it seemed. Without turning to face her, Charl continued to talk to Henri with her back turned.

“I'm sorry, Henri.”

“Eh...?”

“It's true... I might have been feeling a little superior whenever I was together with you. I might have felt more secure whenever you were around.”

What was this? Had someone said something to her?

“But I want you to know I did feel inferior to you in my own way.”

“Eh... Me?”

Henri was flabbergasted. This was a surprising turn of events.

In terms of looks, brains and magic potential, Charl was head and shoulders above Henri.

Charl took a sideward glance at Henri, fidgeting like the next words that she was going say was tough to admit.

“You’re... an inch bigger, aren’t you?”

“Our height...? We’re the same height though.”

“... hest.”

“Eh?”

“I said the chest!”

The tip of Charl’s ears turned a furious shade of red.

“Noooo! Even though I promised myself to never admit it in my lifetime!”

Charl turned her blushing face away, before she noticed Raishin and exploded in anger.

“What are you looking at!? Why are you still here you pervert!”

“Uwaaah, don’t kick me you idiot! You’ll break something!”

“Don’t tell me, you heard everything... Sigmund! Reduce this idiot to dust!”

“Calm down, Charl. This is going to be hard to say, but your secret— the fact that you use padding— was already exposed a long time ago.”

Watching their exchange, a small giggle escaped Henri’s lips.

Giggle, giggle.

“I see... so that was sis was referring to, huh...?”

“Why are you laughing!? Geez!”

Charl was blowing her top, but eventually she was drawn in by Henri and started laughing together with her.

She had always thought her elder sister was perfect, but now Henri learnt that her sister had flaws too.

For a human, envy and jealousy were only natural emotions to feel.

My sister is just like me. A fellow human being.

The tightness in her heart began to unravel. It was like the first glorious rays of the spring sun melting away the last remnants of snow left over from winter.

Even though I'm like this, there is surely some part of me that is more fantastic than Charl.

Obviously, it wasn't just restricted to this flat chest.



The one who taught her that was Raishin.

Raishin was being supported by Yaya, and his face was drenched with blood, but to Henri that face looked so dazzling.

She was scared of men, but it seemed like Raishin could be the exception.

(Thank you, Raishin. One day, I too...)

It was just a tiny fraction, but she came to like herself a little.

Orange rays of light were beginning to stream in from between the gaps of the trees. Little birds began their noisy chorus, signalling the start of a new day.

(7)

Someone had watched the fight from start to end.

That someone was standing on the roof of the headmaster's residence. It was a young man wearing a mask of silver, with two maidens in tow behind him. He was staring off into the thicket of trees.

With a soft thud, someone landed behind him.

The two maidens were immediately on guard. The person showed no fear however, calling out casually to the masked man.

“You’re up pretty late, Magnus. Pulling an all-nighter?”

“I could say the same to you. You’ll mar your beauty being up this late, Professor Kimberly.”

“It’s something of a habit of mine to watch the sunrise. Been doing so ever since I was a child.”

Even though she had crept up behind him, Magnus didn’t turn to face her. He continued to stare at the area where the battle had unfolded, as if he was trying to ascertain something.

“So, you were headhunted to be the headmaster’s bodyguard? I guess once you’re too good, finding things for you to do becomes a problem. Have you considered holding back? I believe your country has a proverb that goes something like: A skilled hawk hides its talons, no?”

Magnus didn’t reply. Kimberly grinned.

“Still, it’s pretty laughable. Who’d have thought that failure was a Machine Doll?”

“... Failure?”

“There’s no way you believe his nonsense. After all, this is your field of expertise, is it not?”

Magnus turned to look back over his shoulder. Finally, she had piqued his interest.

Kimberly had a look on her face like she was going to get one over him as she pressed on.

“Did you know something, Magnus? In some backward area in the Far East, it seems there was a certain idiot who tried to make a Machine Doll out of the body of a girl who was still alive. It happened about two years ago.”

“... Just using a living body in the process is merely creating a Bandoll.”

“At first.”

Magnus’s red eyes pierced through Kimberly, like he could completely see through her.

Kimberly shrugged her shoulders, continuing to speak evasively.

“Don’t look so surprised. Baby steps are required when it comes to inventing new techniques. Since he was trying to create a perfect Machine Doll, it’s not surprising that he would mass produce Bandolls to begin with, right?”

“... What are you getting at?”

“Nectar is watching you closely, Tenzen Akabane.”

Magnus fell silent for a moment.

And then, losing interest in the conversation, he turned to face the front again.

“Oh, you’re not denying it?”

“Whether I am that person you speak of in your story or not is just a trifling matter. I walk my own path— even if it means dying by his hand.”

Magnus’s gaze was resting on Raishin, who was collapsed onto the ground. He was surrounded by four girls, who were for some reason ganging up on him.

“Tamamushi, Kamakiri. Our presence here is no longer required.”

He turned on his heels. The two maidens hurriedly followed after him. Watching him depart, Kimberly spoke in a sharp tone of voice.

“This is a warning. Not as your professor, but as someone who’s lived longer than you.”

“Pray tell.”

“Remember this well. The greatest taboo for a magus is to create a human.”

“... I will take that to heart.”

Without stopping to turn back, he continued to walk away.

Kimberly watched Raishin, a cynical smile forming on her lips.

“Now then... Who’s going to be the one who takes the first bite out of the fruit that Eve plucked?”

The pale sky was tinged with a slight red glow.

That's the same colour as Magnus's maidens' skin, Kimberly thought to herself.

Epilogue – The Gentle Demon

“Ok, Raishin. Say ‘ahhhh’.”



Sitting at his bedside, Henri was clad in a classic maid apron.

Right now, she was bringing an apple, which had been peeled and cut neatly into eight pieces, to Raishin's mouth.

Considering that even moving his finger was enough to send pain shooting all over his body, Raishin was grateful for her kindness—

But at the same time he was feeling conflicted.

Taking a quick glance outside the window, he could see the top of a nurse's cap.

Obviously, that was Yaya. Her silence was scary, so Raishin pushed Henri's hand away.

“Look... I'm grateful that you want to help, but...”

“You have to eat this! Don't you want to get better soon!?”

“Hmph, that idiot can remain like that for all I care.”

A chilly voice drifted into the ward from outside.

The doctor with black-rimmed glasses— Doctor Cruel peeked in from the corridor.

“In fact, he should just suffer. He should get all his fixed bones to break slowly over a few hours as he dies.”

“D-don't say something like that!”

Taking him seriously, Henri drew closer to Cruel, her androphobia seemingly forgotten.

“Doctor, please! Help Raishin recover faster!”

“Hahaha, of course I will. Say, you're pretty cute. Are you a freshman?”

“No... I... Kyaaa!”

Wrapping his arm around her shoulder, her clothes rustled slightly as he began to caress her. Henri turned visibly pale.

“Nooo!!!! A man!!!!”

She threw a punch. However, Cruel dodged it with the ease of a pro who had experienced this countless times.

“Such a pretty girl like you is always welcome here. You should come over more often to play. So, what’s your name?”

“Henriette. She’s my sister, Doctor.”

A cold voice wafted over from behind. Turning around, he saw Charl standing in the doorway. Sigmund was perched atop her hat as always.

A princess had arrived, with her companion dragon in tow.

Hanging his head in disappointment, Cruel left the ward.

In place of the good doctor, Charl stood in front of Raishin.

Her eyes darted all over the place, then she stared at the close off curtain—Loki’s bed was behind it, then she started to tap her foot on the floor, and after hesitating for what seemed like an eternity, she managed to get a few words out.

“I... Well... It looks like this time... I caused you a few problems.”

Charl blushed as she stared at Raishin. He wondered if she was feeling hot, as her eyes were a bit moist.

“Don’t worry, I acted of my own accord. More importantly though—“

Staring at both Henriette and Charlotte, Raishin nodded to himself.

“If you stand together like that, I can really believe you two are sisters. You both look alike.”

“Where did you look to determine that...!?”

Charl’s shoulders twitched. Magic energy flowed into Sigmund as she began to assume a battle aura.

“... Huh? What are you doing all of a sudden— hey, calm down!”

“Ah, I see. I remember now. You are a breasts-loving pervert who can only judge a woman’s value by the size of her chest. A pervert like you should just go be friendly with that pair of udders over there!”

Charl turned her head around.

Standing there was Frey. It looked like she had arrived together with Charl. Frey knitted her brows together in displeasure, glaring at Charl.

“... What? Do you have something you want to say, Frey?”

“Uu... It’s not always a good thing they’re so big...”

“How can being bigger be a bad thing?”

“It’s troublesome when I’m in the bath... My arms get tired...”

Her chest bounced as she made a few washing gestures. It was true though. Since they were large, it meant more surface area to wash. Added to the fact that they were heavier it was likely they would tire Frey out.

Charl’s faced turned vermillion red. Steam burst out of her head as she exploded.

“What’s with that complaint!? How can you even be bothered by something like that!? Washing is so easy! It’s—Uwaaaaaah!!!!”

She suddenly burst into tears. Clinging onto Henri, Charl buried her face into her little sister’s chest.

“S-sis? Um, cheer up. It’s ok, Raishin also finds small ones to his taste. He’s the type whose carnal lust is stirred up by both big and small!”

“Don’t say weird stuff! What kind of sex maniac do you take me for!?”

“So small ones are no good? But I was sure...”

“What were you sure about!? Also, in your cases there’s a problem and it’s not a question of breast size, ok?!”

“How can you say something so cruel!? You even said ‘I’m not a stranger’ to me!”

Instantly, the room’s temperature dropped sharply.

Something close to a killing aura flowed in from outside the window. It wasn’t just outside though. There were two people inside the room emitting the same dark, cold air!

“Not a stranger... what do you mean by that...!?”

“Raishin... you’re the worst... you rapist.”

“Idiots! Does your misunderstanding know no bounds!?”

Raishin desperately tried to salvage the situation. However, he found his words cut off.

With a sharp clink, Cherubim’s blade was pointed at his neck.

“... What is the meaning of this, dear neighbour Loki?”

The curtains were thrown open violently, and Loki’s stuck his face out, eyes half closed.

Numerous veins were twitching on his forehead. He was clearly on the verge of erupting in anger.

“If I may say so myself, I am a tolerant person, but I find myself wanting to kill people who are interrupting my self-study.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong, ok? I’m not the one at fault here, alright?”

“Silence. This is all because of your sleazy philandering ways and your loose behaviour towards women, you idiot.”

“You’re the idiot! How can this development be classified as MY philandering!?”

“Ufufu, oh Raishin... so you’ve been fooling around... Ufufu <3”

The window sill was beginning to crumble under the fury of Yaya’s grip. The Demon had finally awakened.

Perhaps scared of getting involved, Rabi turned and fled into a corner of the room. Sigmund followed, landing on top of Rabi’s armour.

A massacre was about to unfold— but just before it did, there was a sharp sound of someone clapping their hands together.

“It’s so lively every time I come here.”

Everyone turned to face the voice simultaneously, and everyone straightened up immediately.

Kimberly strode in gallantly, a cynical grin on her face.

“Enjoying your popularity amongst girls, **Second Last?**”

“... Not you too. Don’t say things that will invite misunderstandings.”

An instigation on that level was dangerous, even if she meant it as a joke. As it involved his life, Raishin was seriously worried.

“Well you’re all gathered here, so that makes things convenient. The situation has more or less been settled, so I’m clear to convey the headmaster’s decree to you lot. Be thankful. Even though I’m so busy, I took the time to purposely come over.”

She took a break from her patronizing speech to look around.

“Firstly, with regards to the clock tower. Because the damage done to it was by means of a magic art, restoring it is going to be extremely difficult. Thus, a new tower is to be built. Obviously, this is going to cause a great sum of money—“

Charl stiffened. Kimberly’s lips softened a little,

“Which is going to come from the frozen assets of the Belew household.”

Charl stared at her blankly. Her partner Sigmund muttered to her,

“It means the government is going to pay for it, Charl.”

Frozen assets were the assets that Charl could no longer freely touch.

“Eh— they managed to squeeze money out from there? How did they manage to pull that off...?”

“I don’t know the details myself. According to what the headmaster said, it seems a certain wealthy person—don’t ask who— mediated with the British parliament.”

“Wealthy person...?”

“A certain daughter who’s enrolled in this academy. That’s all I can say.“

Raishin wondered why he found that so suspicious.

Kimberly ignored him as she continued talking.

“Next. I think you’ve already heard this, but Henri’s enrolment was incomplete—because of irregularities found, her name has been struck off the school’s register.”

It was a strict resolution. With this Henri could no longer remain in the academy—

“To that point, she will come work for me in my research lab. I’ve been wanting a helper to assist with chores anyway. You can think of her as a maid for my office. That’s the reason why she’s wearing what she’s wearing now.”

Raishin thought back to when he had entered her office. It was true, she did need a helper.

“You’re going to my assistant. Obviously, this means I’ll be responsible for your care.”

In other words, the Mages Association was going to protect her!

“Professor...!” “Thank you very much!”

The sisters bowed deeply with emotion, conveying their gratitude.

On the other hand, Kimberly was unexpectedly pleased with herself.

“You don’t have to thank me. For me, having **Tyrant Rex** in my debt isn’t that bad a deal.”

Charl, Raishin and Loki all gulped at the same time, their faces looking like they had swallowed something bitter.

The way things ended up... Kimberly was the only winner!

Loki and Charl were honour students who were part of the renowned Rounds. Frey was emerging as a strong competitor, and Raishin possessed the world’s strongest automaton.

Having these four in her pocket mean that she was able to manipulate the outcome of the Night Party.

Just what in the world was Kimberly planning? Quite frankly, Raishin shuddered at the thought.

“Well, that’s all I have to say. Now it’s time to let the boys rest.”

Kimberly turned and exited just as gallantly as she had entered the room.

Watching her depart, Raishin sunk into thought.

This incident wasn't fully resolved just yet.

That butler— Shin had escaped, and the puppeteer behind the whole affair had yet to be exposed.

In addition, there was the matter of the person who had been observing Henri.

If it was just Shin alone there would have been blind spots to hide. No, there had to be someone on the inside who was her watcher.

He was also curious about the large cavern underground and the Mages Association's motives.

Another thing to consider, as far off as it was, was the issue of Magnus.

Honestly, Raishin felt uneasy. But in front of him were a pair of sisters laughing harmoniously.

Without exaggeration, that was definitely something to be joyous about, he thought.

Raishin found himself laughing along with the two of them.

Evening. The weak light from the western sun filtered in, casting dim shadows across the ward.

Frey had left to take part in the Night Party, and Charl had went to watch and scout. Loki was performing maintenance on Cherubim, and so everyone had left the ward, leaving only Yaya and Raishin behind.

Yaya stared out the window at the setting sun, squinting her eyes against the gentle breeze.

Raishin had been given painkillers, and had been drifting in and out of consciousness since earlier.

“Are you awake, Raishin?”

“... Yeah.”

“They’re all good people, aren’t they?”

“... I’m not attracted to any of them, ok?”

“Your denial is suspicious...”

His eyes widened involuntarily in fear. However, Yaya just shook her head.

“That’s not it. I’m saying we’ll eventually have to fight them, won’t we...?”

Raishin fell silent for a moment, then went “... Yeah.” In a low voice.

“Sigmund and Rabi...”

She didn’t finish. The rest might be painful for Raishin to hear.

She really wanted to say it though. She wanted to say that eventually they would have to end up being wrecked.

“Don’t worry. You’re the strongest automaton in the world.”

“... That wasn’t what I was getting at.”

“I will gain more strength, and become a suitable puppeteer for you. So—”

Her interest piqued, she turned around to see Raishin smiling gently at her.

“—that we can successfully come out on top of this crappy path of carnage we’re walking upon.”

There was consideration hidden in those words.

Understanding the meaning behind those words, Yaya raised her hands happily.

“Yes!”

After that, her mood considerably improved, a beaming Yaya placed a hand on Raishin’s bed.

“By the way, Raishin.”

“What?”

“You just said you’d become a suitable man for Yaya...<3”

“I did not! You’re twisting what I said on purpose!”

“You’re fine as you are right now, Raishin. So please make Yaya your wife right now!”

“I refuse! I’m begging you, just let me recover in peace!”

The distance between them slowly changed as they both jockeyed for space. A cool breeze blew through the ward dyed amber by the setting sun.

And tonight, the Night Party was going to start again—